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holy birth

My child, if you sleep now
the boughs of heaven may bow
And weighted by the ages' ice
touch branches to the ground
The stars may hover closer
the angel bridge the berth
And as the tree is doubled
a star may touch the earth

Oh, I have waited lives and lives
and just grown strong and old
Have sung a hundred carols
in a hundred winters' cold
A well-wind brushes others
who keep their watch tonight
A song is being sung to them
who close their eyes in fright

My child, if you rest now
and take a break from sight
The darkness in your dreams may break
and apprehend the light
It was in your slumber
the wondrous work began
For only in a child's dreams
can God become a man

So if you close your eyes now
the blessing may begin
And you may find the child in you
has brushed the child in Him
Your paper pony portends
may save us once again
And in your heart the love of God
be born the love of men

Brett Alan Dewing

Telling the Good News

John Koole

Any writer knows that a good opening line is essential. Charles Dickens, in *A Tale of Two Cities,* wrote one of the most famous: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . . ."

How do the gospel writers fare with their openings? Why do Matthew and Luke open their account more elaborately than Mark with his one-liner and John with his *Prologue?*

All four gospels really begin with the Baptizer, even Matthew, though you don't notice it until chapter three. It seems everyone was sure the "good news" began at the Jordan. When Luke begins with the birth of John, it is almost as though he wants to keep John before us as the great herald of the Messiah even though the Christmas story necessitates a postponement of the *real* beginning. Of course no disciple was a firsthand witness of Jesus' earlier life, but the relationship between Jesus and David needs explaining.

Matthew appropriately begins by connecting his story with the last books of the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles. His geneology updates the royal Davidic line to Joseph. Jesus was not just *called* the son of David; through Joseph he *was* such. While establishing a Davidic setting at Bethlehem, Matthew adds gentile worshipers and Egypt as a refuge – the beginning of Jesus' persecution and rejection by the leaders of the Jewish nation. What Herod the Great begins, the chief priest and elders will finish, killing the Messiah. Matthew's opening masterfully links his story to Israelite national history under Davidic kings, as well as foreshadows what lies in store for the child born in Bethlehem.

"Nativity" by He Qi, a professor at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary in China

In those days . . .

Luke also uses the Christmas story to connect the gospel with Israelite themes. He takes us to the temple, where a priest offers sacrifice and is told his barren wife will bear a son who will be a Nazirite (Num.6) – a kind of Samson, Samuel, and Saul as backdrop to Jesus, the new David. He emphasizes the firm rooting of Jesus in Israelite religious practice. Jesus is circumcised, Mary is purified, and pious Jews acknowledge the child with blessing and thanksgivings. The Messiah is, as Paul writes, "born of a woman, born under the law."

When Luke's opening mentions the world ruler Caesar Augustus, he reaches beyond his first book. The gospel of the Jewish Messiah will march into the Roman world in the book of Acts. The new story, however, will not deal with kings and their battles with hostile nations, but with raising up the humble and weak in Israel and recognizing true faith among those not born under the law. The songs speak of the knowledge of salvation through forgiveness, of the scattering of the proud rather than of hostile armies, and of the light coming to all the world. The gospel proclaimed is a rich and personal good news declared to Israel's poor and broken. It is not a record of the slaughter of foes, but of the gentle rescue provided by the royal shepherd sent from God.

We must hear the whole story, but having heard, we return again each year to see how well the opening prepares us for the rest, already showing the way our faithful God will bring his majestic plan to completion. The news we bring to a world of violence and injustice really is good, for the child born under the law according to the promises made through many generations now will show us who God really is. Our joy will be full.

John Koole lives in Strathroy, Ontario.

News

Barriers to Bethlehem:

Christmas behind walls

Dena Nicolai

Bethlehem calls up rustic images of mangers, barns and shepherds. It's not often that we think of the contemporary Christians who live in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ. Yet this advent season, Palestinian Christians are making the same preparations for Christmas as you, with one exception. As part of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, their lives are dictated by the whims of a wall that limits freedom and shrinks family reunions.

Fady and Abeer Rishmawi have family members scattered across the world. They are Greek Orthodox Christians from the village of Beit Sahour, directly adjoining Bethlehem. Some family left for study, others to seek economic opportunity elsewhere. Many of them are now unable to return. Fady has not seen his sister in 22 years, and his children have never met their aunt.

"She left to study in Lebanon and married there, and now the Israelis will not let her come back. I also had a brother in Honduras who was denied entry, and he died before I could see him again."

Not far from the Rishmawi's house is the wall, or "separation barrier," that the Israelis erected around Bethlehem and the rest of the West Bank. In some places, the barrier is highly sophisticated electric fencing, including two-meter deep trenches, roads for patrol vehicles, electronic sensors, thermal imaging and video cameras, sniper towers and razor wire. In Bethlehem, however, it is all of this plus a concrete wall, eight metres high. The wall, erected by the Israelis over security concerns, is a daily reminder to the people of Bethlehem that they live under occupation.

Israel's separation barrier circles the city of Bethlehem.

One can argue that any country has the right to erect a barrier on its own borders. In fact, America has discussed just this, particularly in its south. However, the building of Israel's "separation barrier" – which is planned to be longer than the Berlin Wall – has been labelled illegal by

Graffiti on the separation barrier. Elsewhere, it reads "Free Palestine" and "The wall must fall."

the International Court of Justice and the United Nations. On paper, Israel speaks of security, but on the ground, the wall is a land grab. Much of the 640 km (400 mile) barrier, started in 2002, is being built on territory Israel occupied in 1967, rather than along the internationally recognised boundary between Israel and the West Bank. Maps show the wall jutting into Palestinian territory, cutting some farmers' olive groves in half, separating children from their schools and, in some cases, surrounding entire homes.

Freedom of movement

The distance from Jerusalem to Bethlehem is only about 10 km, but for some Palestinians, it might as well be 3000. Without Israeli-government issued permits to travel to the other side of the separation barrier, their freedom of movement is severely restricted. Even when these permits are issued for special feasts and holidays, they are often issued irregularly, splitting families. Last Easter, Abeer received a permit to cross the wall and pray in Jerusalem. But her husband, Fady, has been refused continually over the past 10 years.

Even if Fady did get permission, however, he is hesitant about taking it. The series of permanent and temporary Israeli military checkpoints between Bethlehem and Jerusalem (and throughout the West Bank) can double or even triple travel times. Though Israel self-labels as "one of the most moral militaries in the world," according to one University student who had already completed his Israeli Defence Force (IDF) time, the control of each checkpoint still falls in the hands of the individual soldiers, who are often 18 and 19 year old boys. They have the ability to make these mandatory crossings difficult or easy for whomever they choose. In the most crowded checkpoints, Palestinians are often herded like cattle into separate lines for men and women, with soldiers shouting commands above the noise.

"The checkpoints are humiliating," says Fady. "The Israeli soldiers search you, they question you, sometimes they even make you become naked. I do not like to be humiliated. So even if I had a permit for Jerusalem, I still might not go."

Tourists and the wall

Though Israel itself receives millions of tourists per year, very few of them have any exposure to what's going on in modern day Israel. Indeed for many tourists, particularly those on large group package tours, the Israeli Occupation and the eight metre high wall are invisible. The checkpoint at the wall has lanes reserved for tour buses which whiz by, completely oblivious to the many Palestinians who may be waiting hours simply to return home or visit family on the other side of the barrier.

In addition, the economically disadvantaged West Bank sees very little income from the millions of tourists who visit Bethlehem each year.

"We figure that most tourists cost us more than they contribute to us", says Ra'fat Shomali, who works with Holy Land Trust, a non-profit organization that, among other things, offers opportunities for tourists to encounter Palestinian culture and people. "Large groups come in for two hours to see the Church of the Nativity and Manger Square and then they leave. The church is free to enter, they don't eat lunch here, they don't shop here, and they use Israeli tour companies and guides. But who pays for the upkeep of the Church and the other sites? Who cleans the streets and monitors the sites?"

Christians in the Holy Land

Here, in the land where Christ was born, the native Christian community, which includes the Rishmawi's and Ra'fat Shomali, is steadily shrinking. In the past few decades, the number of Christians has dropped to half of what it once was, due to declining birth rates and mass emigration because of conflict and lack of economic opportunity. Many Palestinians see little ahead but more struggle and dispossession, and the Christian community is no different. The Christians traditionally have an easier time getting visas to Western countries, and despite their deep attachment to

See **Bethlehem** *on page 3*

News

John the Forerunner

Among the four gospels, Luke is unique in offering readers four canticles, along the lines of those found in the Old Testament. The best known of these is the *Magnificat* of the Virgin Mary (1:46-55), whose structure and content is patterned after the ancient Song of Hannah (I Samuel 2:1-10). Another is the *Nunc Dimittis* of Simeon (Luke 2:29-32), the elderly man who rejoiced that his eyes had at last seen in Jesus the salvation God had "prepared in the presence of all peoples." The *Gloria in Excelsis* (2:14) would come to be elaborated and extended, finding its way into the ordinary of the mass in the western church.

Then there is the *Benedictus* of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, who sang it on the occasion of his son's birth, shortly after his voice had returned to him (Luke 1:68-79). In the Orthodox tradition John is called *Prodromos* or Forerunner. He is portrayed in icons with long unkempt hair and beard, and with a cloth cloak covering a blue feathery camel hair shirt. He is sometimes given angelic wings, as Jesus had identified him as the promised messenger (Greek: *angelos*) sent before him (Malachi 3:1; Matthew 11:10). Sometimes John is even shown carrying his own severed head in a dish!

During his lifetime, John was popularly recognized to be a prophet, and even the sceptical authorities were reluctant to deny it outright for fear of the people (Mark 11:32). Zechariah himself had prophesied that his son would be "called the prophet of the Most High" and "go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (76). Jesus identified John with Elijah, whose coming "before the great and awesome day of the LORD" Malachi had forecast centuries earlier (Matthew 11:14; Malachi 4:5).

Nearly a decade ago I wrote a metrical versification of the text of Zechariah's song, to be sung to the tune, **AN WASSERFLÜSSEN BABYLON**, by Wolfgang Dachstein, organist for Martin Bucer who contributed to the metrical psalter used in 16th-century Strasbourg.

Principalities & Powers

David T. Koyzis

I offer this text as my gift to our readers during this Advent season:

Praise to the Lord, to Israel's God
who came to bring us redemption,
for he has raised from David's house
a mighty power for salvation.
He spoke through prophets long ago
that he would free us from the foe.
He promised father Abr'ham
that he would save us, free of all fears,
from every enemy that appears,
that we might serve in holiness before him.

You, little child, are called of God
to prophesy to the nation,
to go before the Saviour's way
and gladly herald salvation;
to tell abroad to all that live
that God is anxious to forgive;
for through his mercies tender,
his rising sun will shine from above,
illuming those who strayed from his love,
to guide their feet in peace with his own splendour.

David T. Koyzis teaches political science at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario. Text and music for the Benedictus *can be found here: http://genevanpsalter.redeemer.ca/genevan_psalter_files/benedictus.pdf*

Bethlehem *continued from page 2*

their land, they take these visas when they can.

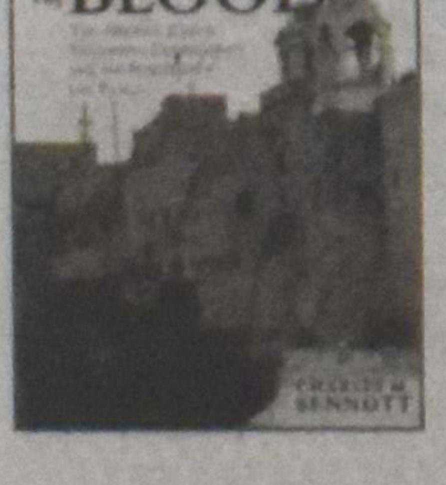
Ra'fat is resigned: "I would love to raise my children here in our land and our culture, but how can I deny them their freedom?" Many outside of the Middle East peg the conflict as a Muslim versus Jewish conflict, but as Elias Chacour, the Palestinian archbishop of the Greek Catholic church in Israel-Palestine points out, "One thing we ask is that our Christian brothers and sisters in the West not forget that Christians still exist, here in the land where Christ was born." Palestinian Christians feel the same connection to the land as Palestinian Muslims, and the desire for an end to Occupation transcends religions.

Merry Christmas

As December's end draws closer in the little town of Bethlehem, the lights and the trimmings will begin to appear in shop windows. The Christians of Bethlehem and Beit Sahour will begin to prepare for the holidays, surrounded by concrete walls and divided olive groves. Tourists will continue to stream in with their bright neon hats and romanticized visions of crèches and a little baby Jesus, unaware that outside the facade of Manger Square, an occupation continues.

In some places, the barrier includes electric fencing, trenches, sensors, thermal imaging, razor wire and sniper towers.

"These are our lives" echo the university students, and the families, and the shop-owners. "We get tired, and we don't like to always talk about it. But please, don't forget about us."



Dena Nicolai is from Edmonton, Alberta, and currently lives and works in Cairo, Egypt. She has travelled to Bethlehem and the West Bank numerous times, most recently in November 2009 as part of a study-tour with American and Canadian University students from the study abroad program she works with. She recommends that those interested in learning more about Christians in the Middle East read The Body and the Blood *(Charles M. Sennott),* From the Holy Mountain *(William Dalrymple) and any book by Elias Chacour.*

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.
Luke 2:14

From my family to yours,

Merry Christmas!

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Editorials

Christmas – a curse on thorns and thistles

Bert Witvoet

The speaker at the Indiana Christian Teachers Convention was Calvin DeWitt, and he told us that "Joy to the World" is not a Christmas song. So there! He explained that this hymn, written by Isaac Watts, the fellow who wrote at least 600 hymns during his life time, is based on Psalm 98, particularly verses 4 to 9, in which the psalmist urges all of creation to praise God – the sea, the world, the rivers, the mountains – "for he comes to judge the earth."

So "Joy to the World" is about the second, not the first coming of Christ. A close examination of the hymn proves DeWitt right: "No more let sin and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground; he comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found."

Isaac Watts was a theologian as well as poet, and he knew his Scripture. The third verse of his hymn takes us right back to the Fall of Adam and Eve, where God tells Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food…."

Well, that curse will be lifted when Christ returns. No more thorns and thistles. No more sweat of the brow. "Joy to the world! The Lord is come: Let earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing."

DeWitt likes this emphasis on the restoration of creation because he is a scientist and environmentalist who longs for the restoration of the earth. Of course, he insists that we should be busy today helping that restoration along. But he is enough of a biblical realist to know that the complete restoration depends on the coming again of Christ and his kingdom.

Away with the manger?

So should we sing, "Joy to the world" at Christmas time? I believe from the bottom of my thorn-infested heart that we should. In fact, I think it's the kind of hymn that does a better job of celebrating the birth of Christ then, for example, "Away in a Manger." Apart from the fact that the little Lord Jesus had no crib for a bed, which, in light of the faulty cribs manufactured by Storkcraft, can be deemed a plus, and that he slept in the hay, which is preferable to germ-infested pillows distributed by airlines, the Manger hymn ends by asking this little Lord Jesus to bless all the dear children in his tender care and to prepare them for heaven (not the restored earth) to live with him there.

Okay, I have stepped on a thousand toes by now, including my own. I like "Away in a Manger," especially as a song for children. I am not suggesting that we should stop singing it either. But I do think that we tend to lose sight of the gritty, hard-nosed side of the birth of Jesus. It was not a cutesy baby that the Shepherds and the Magi came to adore. It was the Saviour of all humankind – the Star in the east. They came to worship him, not to drool over him.

Isaac Watts brings us closer to that reality in verse 4: "He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love." This vision is bigger and more biblical than some of the maudlin stuff our songs employ. I hope that preachers throughout the land don't get lost in the sentimentality of a baby, "no crying he makes," but explain the incredible love of our God manifested in the beginning of this historical and world-changing event, as he entered our world in the form of a human person, who became like us, sin excepted.

Yes, Jesus was a helpless child, but against what background should we see that helplessness? Surely against the background of the larger strategy that followed the Fall of humankind into sin. Once we see Christmas as a moment in the cosmic struggle of evil against God, we can begin to do justice to the Bethlehem story. With wonder in our eyes and tremolo in our voices we can sing, "Come and stand amazed, you people, see how God is reconciled! See his plans of love accomplished; see his gift, this newborn child…. See how humankind received him; see him wrapped in swaddling bands, who as Lord of all creation rules the wind by his commands." (Dutch medieval hymn translated by Klaas Hart)

As we sit in our warm comfortable pews and sing our Christmas songs, let's open wide the windows of the sanctuary. Or, better yet, let's leave the pews and stand outside in the bitter cold and sing, "Joy to the world." Then listen to how "fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy." God is out there making his Kingdom come.

Do not go gentle

Angela Reitsma Bick

"We need to talk about death," he began calmly. "Birth is really popular, but death is taboo in Canada."

Good point, I thought. I had never heard of Tim Falconer but – always curious to meet a Canadian author – had skimmed the dust jacket of his latest book and settled in the back row of the small, crowded bookstore to hear him speak.

"We need to have two conversations," he continued. "The first is private, between family members, discussing when and how to die. The second is public: whether or not to allow assisted suicide in Canada." Everyone sat up a little straighter. It was a politically charged statement. I can summarize the next hour of Tim Falconer as follows: "Nobody wants to live a long time hooked up to machines. Therefore, we should legalize assisted suicide."

Death may be taboo in Canada, but dying has been a hot topic on Parliament Hill lately.

Falconer's sentiment is reflected in a private member's bill that hopes to amend the Criminal Code to legalize both euthanasia (deliberately ending a life) and assisted suicide (finding assistance to end your own life). In its first hour of debate, six MPs spoke against Bill C-384. It will be voted on while this issue goes to print, and I pray that there is enough opposition to stop it. If it is passed, anyone over 18 who is terminally ill or experiencing pain without relief can apply for the "right to die" by writing two explanatory statements, ten days apart.

A call to arms

This bill highlights the great need for Christians in Canada to speak up in opposition to legislative changes that contradict our beliefs. Far too often, we grumble about a perceived decline in the values of fellow Canadians, but fail to join in broader conversations about this decline in thoughtful, meaningful ways.

All life is a gift from God, from conception to natural death. When living becomes a burden for someone, we are called to show the compassion of Christ to that person (*Acts of Synod*, 1997), not pull a *deus-ex-machina* to remove that burden.

Falconer argues that certain deaths are more grievous, more drawn-out than they need to be. But who among us can possibly determine what needs to be? "Even in the midst of great pain, Lord / I praise you for that which is" (Psalm 4, translated by Stephen Mitchell). If we wrench even more control out of the hands of our maker, the consequences will be as devastating as they have been since abortion was legalized. We cannot hope to measure grief or suffering accurately, or to handle the consequences of our limited understanding. The life-affirming alternative to euthanasia is to improve palliative care in Canada, so that everyone who needs it has funding and access to home care and medical support.

Self-help seduction

I recently read *The Household Guide to Dying,* a novel that chronicles Delia's actions as she watches death-by-cancer approaching. She's a busy wife and mother, mid-stride, so she copes as she always has: by making lists. She cancels her own credit cards, writes the menu for her daughters' weddings (years away), and orders and tests out a coffin. She tries to tie up every loose end that makes up a life. But life cannot be tidily contained like that. And death can't be added to our ever-growing list of Things-to-Do, as if it were just one more thing to schedule.

We are, at least for now, subject to the messy bits that come with living, from start to finish. Only Christ has triumphed over death, and that knowledge eases a little of the suffering we may face now.

"I pray for whatever you send me,
And I ask to receive it as your gift.
You have put a joy in my heart
greater than all the world's riches."

Tim Falconer, it turns out, had a hard time with his father's decline and slow death. He's probably right that as baby boomers watch parents die, and get older themselves, they will push for something like Bill C-384. That's why we need to pay attention to what's going on in the House of Commons and in local bookstores. He's right that we should have more conversations about death. And I think we have some vital information to add to that discussion.

"I lie down trusting the darkness,
for I know that even now you are here."

(*A Book of Psalms: Selected and Adapted from the Hebrew*, Stephen Mitchell).

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Canada

Christmas Greetings

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.
John 1:14

The residents of **Shalom Manor & Shalom Gardens** in Grimsby, Ontario,
a Christian Long-Term Care Home and Retirement Centre
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Benedict XVI's encyclical *...continued from p. 16*

"where the very possibility of integral human development is called into question." In fact, this field has become "radically anthropological in the sense that it concerns not just how life is conceived but also how it is manipulated, as biotechnology places it increasingly under man's control." These practices, denying human dignity, "foster a materialistic and mechanistic understanding of human life." Rather than allowing these practices, governments should "enact policies promoting the centrality and the integrity of the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman, the primary vital cell of society."

It's clear that the Church's social doctrine is interdisciplinary and that the segmentation of knowledge is rejected. But society often ignores this sensible approach. Moral aspects are often excluded, and through the "pernicious influence of sin" there is a "conviction that man is self-sufficient and can successfully eliminate the evil present in history by his own action alone." The results have been a deprivation of Christian hope and an "abuse of the economic process in a thoroughly destructive way," such as scandalous speculation. The pope, therefore, calls for some regulation in the financial sector. Accepting that "the market is subject to the principles of so-called commutative justice, which regulates the relations of giving and receiving between parties to a transaction, the social doctrine of the Church has unceasingly highlighted the importance of distributive justice and social justice for the market economy." Thus, commercial logic is insufficient, and the market is not ethically neutral. For instance, outsourcing can "weaken the company's sense of responsibility towards the stakeholders in favor of the shareholders, who are not tied to a specific geographical area." However, "there is an increasing awareness of the need for greater social responsibility on the part of business." Globalization, offering many opportunities, can lead, if badly directed, to poverty and inequality. Benedict, therefore, suggests a reform of the UN and of economic institutions and international finance, so that the concept of the family of nations can acquire real teeth.

Bert den Boggende (bertdenb@yahoo.com) has a Ph.D in British history and is a retired teacher who still does some substituting. He lives in Brooks, Alberta

Christmas Greetings from Holland Christian Homes

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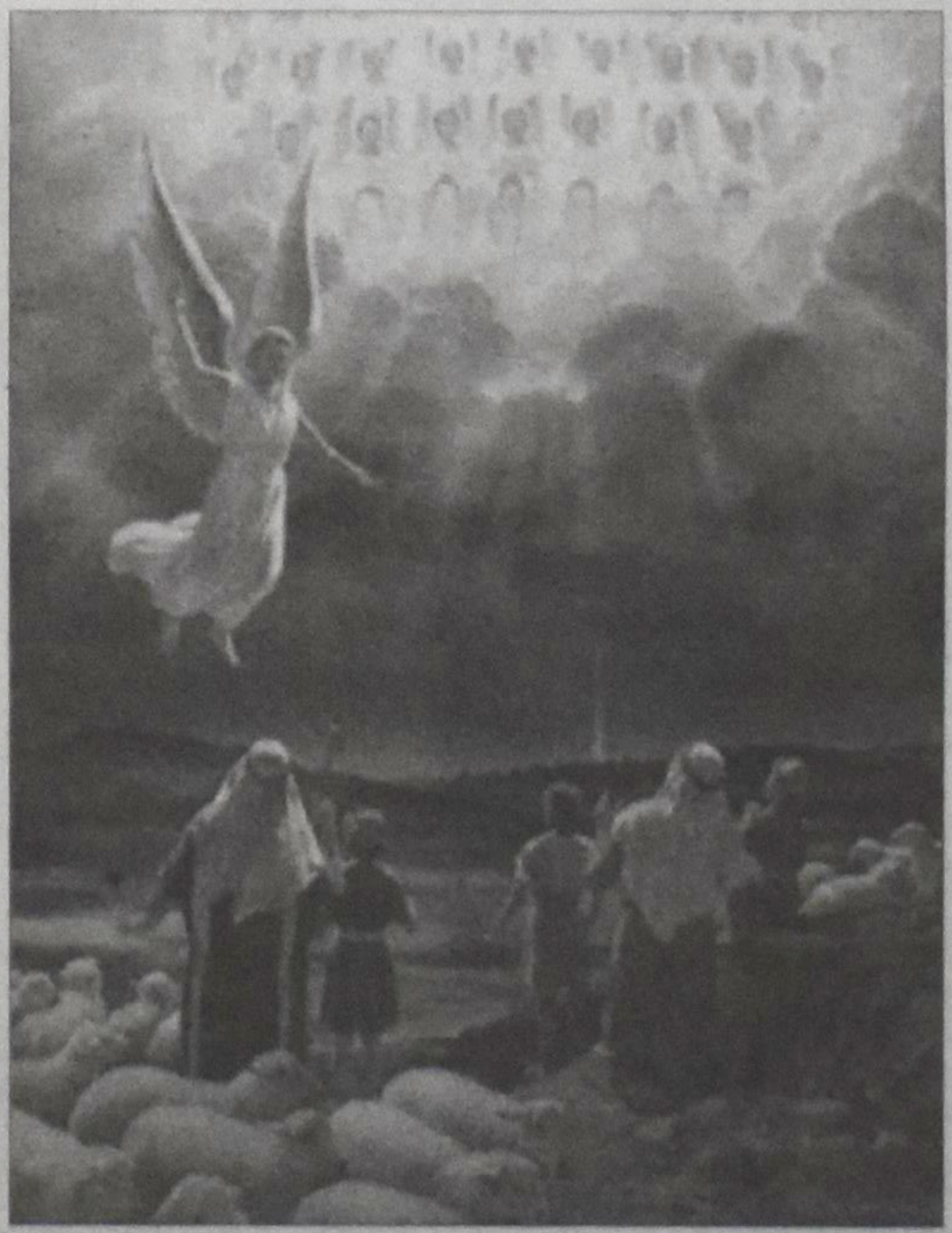
Stanley Trochonowicz	GM301S
Jenny Hensen	HT502
Lini R. Grol	HT1010
Trudy Oosterhof	PT603
Zwier & Ann Adriaanse	HT512
Helen Reinders	TT206
Mrs. C. VanderWoude	TT506
Sybil McKenzie	HT104
Paula & Wim Vandermeer	HT713
John Kooistra	TT301
Bertha Dehoop	TT414
Tilly Hoekstra	CT405
Harry Roffel	TT516
Laura Perry	TT419
Henry & Elisabeth Beintema	PT507



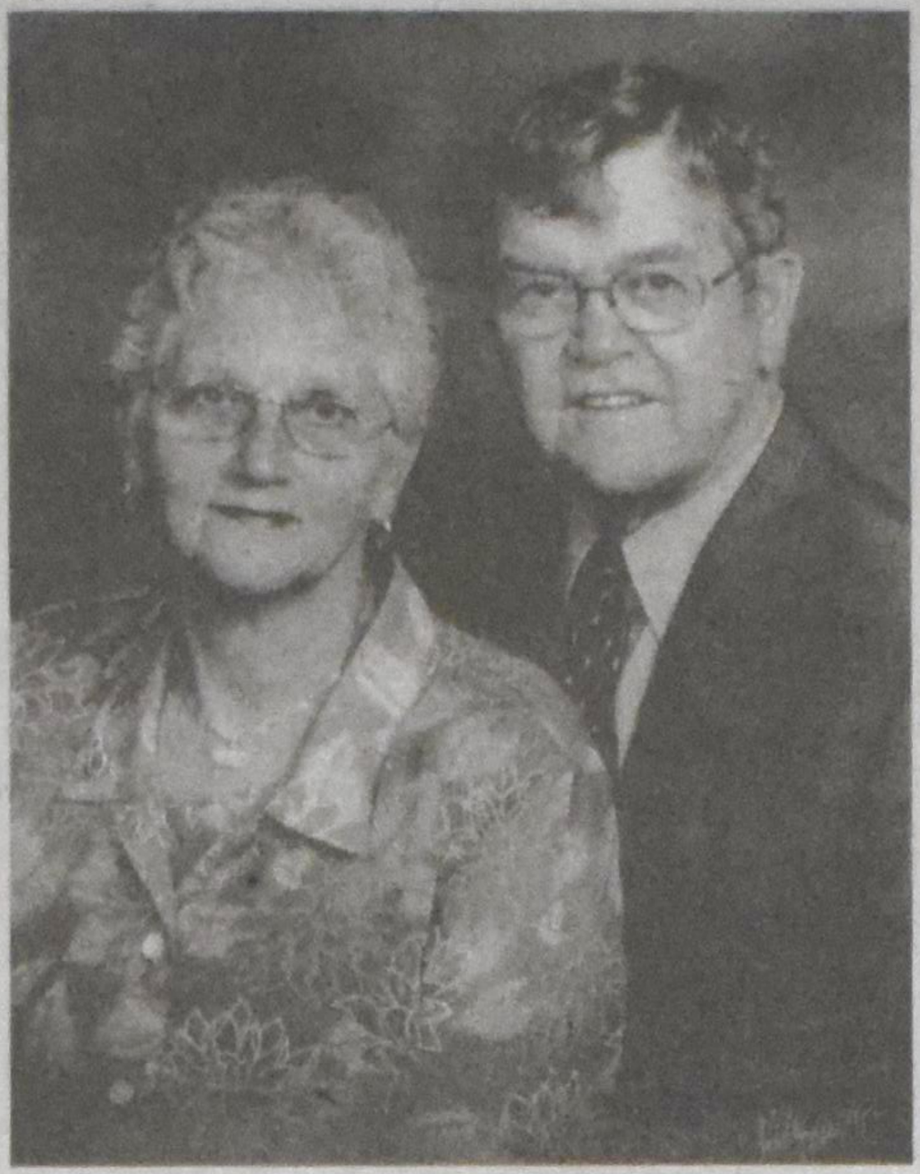
Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.
Luke 2:14

7900 McLaughlin Road South, Brampton, Ontario www.hch.ca

Classifieds

Anniversaries

1959 December 30 2009



Deeply grateful to God

RICHARD AND WILLY ZANTINGH (nee Sjaarda)

Celebrate with friends and family their **50th Wedding Anniversary** D.V.

That you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice and hold fast to him.
Deuteronomy 30:20 A

Congratulations Dad & Mom, Grandpa and Grandma
Ken & Nancy Zantingh, *Dunnville Ont.*
Bruce & Liz Zantingh, *Simcoe Ont.*
Sonja & Gerry Tebrake, *Burlington Ont.*
Chris & Monica Zantingh, *Dunnville Ont.*
Cynthia & Alex Buist, *Canfield Ont.*
Andrew & Kelly Zantingh, *Hamilton Ont.*
Joanne & Eric Dekorte, *Fenwick Ont.*
Along with 36 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren

The Lord has richly blessed you.

Please join us for a Celebration and Reflection Service 2.00 p.m.
Followed by an **Open House** from 3.00 p.m. to 5.00 p.m.
Saturday January 2nd 2010. At Bethel Christian Reformed Church
17 Robinson Road Dunnville Ontario.
Best Wishes Only
Home Address: 952 Robinson Road Dunnville ON N1A 2

1959 — December 18 — 2009
Jarvis, Ontario

JOHN AND TRUDY KLOET (Prinzen)

will be celebrating their
50th Wedding Anniversary.

Congratulations from your family!

We love you!

Richard & Corry
Darren (Bethany), Andrea, Brian
Cambridge, Ontario
Darlene & Ted Berkel
Mike, Paul, Tim, Grace
Simcoe, Ontario
Robert & Bettie
Jessica, Sarah, Matthew
Hamilton, Ontario
John & Lisa
Tyler, Selena, Rachel, Jonathon
Jarvis, Ontario

Home address: RR 1
Jarvis ON N0A 1J0

Obituaries

Makkinga, Friesland Trenton, Ontario

DICTUS (Dick) DE JONG

Died peacefully in his sleep to be with his Lord and Saviour, on the morning of Friday, November 6th, 2009, at the Trenton Memorial Hospital after a couragious battle with cancer. Dick was in his 75th year.

Beloved husband of Maria (Mary) DeJong (Dreise). Loving father of
Ted and Judy DeJong of *Campbellford*
Marianne and Mark Visser *of Chatham*
Dianne DeJong *of Belleville*
David and Cathy DeJong *of Shannonville*
Ken and Gillian DeJong *of Orangeville* and
Jennifer and Michael Jones *of Smithfield.*
Dick will be lovingly remembered by his 12 grandchildren.

Predeceased by 1 grandson, 1 brother & 2 sisters. Survived by his siblings, Tess and John Van-Netten of Toronto, Henry and Jane DeJong of Baltimore, and Gerben and Anne DeJong also of Baltimore. Sadly missed by in-laws Dina Dreise, Marten and Grace Van Rooyen, Albert and Alida Dreise, and many nephews and nieces.

Visitation was held at the Walas Funeral Home, Brighton, Sunday November 8, 2009. **Funeral Service** was held at the Fellowship Christian Reformed Church, Brighton Ontario on Monday, November 9. Interment – Warkworth Cemetery.

Psalm 23:6
"*...I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*"

Correspondence: Maria De Jong
Apt. 319 - 52 Tripp Blvd, Trenton ON K8V 5V1

REIND GERRIT WIKKERINK

On November 13, 2009 Reind was taken home to live in glory with his Saviour and Lord, also joining his beloved wife who passed on last month. He lived a wonderful, full life of exemplary Christian service. He was a humble, quiet and caring man who enjoyed God's wonderful creation, had a strong work ethic and who loved his family.

He was a dedicated husband to Wilma, and a wonderful father and grandfather to: Janet and Richard Blyleven (Nicole and Dave, Kristen, Jared, Brain) Wes and Cynthia Wikkerink (Rebekah, Celeste) Yolanda and Barry Ryzebol (Alyssa, David, Andrew, Michael).

He is survived by Coby and Henk Kraaij, Anna Wikkerink, Dineke Kodde, Henk and Gerda Kuipery, Johanna Bent and Riek Bosman.

He was predeceased by his parents Wessel and Dela Wikkerink and his father-in-law and mother-in-law Eduard and Dina Bosman. Also predeceased by Jan and Bets Wikkerink, Hanna and Derk Roelofsen, Wim Wikkerink, Hans and Lien Wikkerink, Sina and David Kodde, Gesienus Wikkerink, Henk and Jessie Wikkerink, Ina and Engbert Rhebergen, Herman Houwers, Johan Bosman, Henk Bent, and John Bosman.

As an expression of sympathy, donations may be made to the Christian Reformed World Relief Committe (CRWRC).

Correspondence: Yolanda Ryzebol
202312 County Rd. 109 RR4
Grand Valley ON L0N 1G0

Birthday

With thanks to God for his Grace and Faithfulness, we congratulate

Wilhelmina Vandergeest-Speelman

on the occasion of her **80th Birthday**.
May God continue to lead and guide her and keep her in his care.
With all our love from her family:
Jan, loving husband
John & Ann
Peter & Luin
Anthony & Alice-Ann
Martin
William
Anne & Maurice
12 Grandchildren

Address: C315 – 600 Saulsbury Street
Strathroy ON N7G 0A8

Anniversary

1959 December 4 2009

With joy and thankfulness to God,
we announce the
50th Wedding Anniversary
of our parents and grandparents,

REX AND CAROL HOEKSTRA

We are so thankful for the wonderful blessing you are to all of us !

With Love from your family:
Sylvia & Lloyd; Trudy, Steve, Kara & Lindsey;
Jennifer, Andrew, Charlotte, Emily & Jack

Address: 4110 Lynn St. RR 4, Orillia ON L3V 6H4

Phone: 705-325-4167

Please contact

I would like to make contact with the lady (then a teenager) who immigrated with her family to Canada, arriving in Halifax aboard the ship **SSWaterman** on Julu 31, 1953.

My telephone is
604-940-1145
e-mail: jsmid@telus.net

Our address:
5070 Bentley Drive
Delta BC V4K 4J9

For sale

Introducing
Church on the Rock(s)
a review about the church in North America.
- roots of decay
- steps toward restoration
- alternatives for believers

Price:
$17.95 + $3.99 for S&H

www.richardoostra.com

Address: 209 - 9006 158 St
Surrey BC V4N 5G4

House available

Bert and Alice Witvoet plan to spend two months in South Africa again from January 15 to March 15. We are willing to allow a couple we trust to live in our home in **St. Catharines** for that time period for the cost of utilities. Please contact us at bert.witvoet@sympatico.ca or telephone us at 905-684-3991

Vacation accomodation

LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA
Coming to Alberta?
Stay in one of our cozy cottages.
Contact: Ernst & Louise Sluijmers
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Welkom

Holiday accomodation in Holland

with vehicle rentals and tours.
www.chestnutlane.nl

November 28, 1915 November 5, 2009

MAGDA VAN GEEST (VanderLugt)

Went home to be with her Lord on November 5, 2009 at Shalom Manor, Grimsby

She is survived by her children and grandchildren:

Harry and Mary Janssens

Len Van Geest: Dan, Jordana & Brian & their mother Nellie Pajunen

Ted & Marge Van Geest:
Jeff & Melanie – Ronin; Matt & Esther – Gabriela, Niko; Joel & Courtney – Grayson, Isabel

Mieke Van Geest: Jana & Cristos

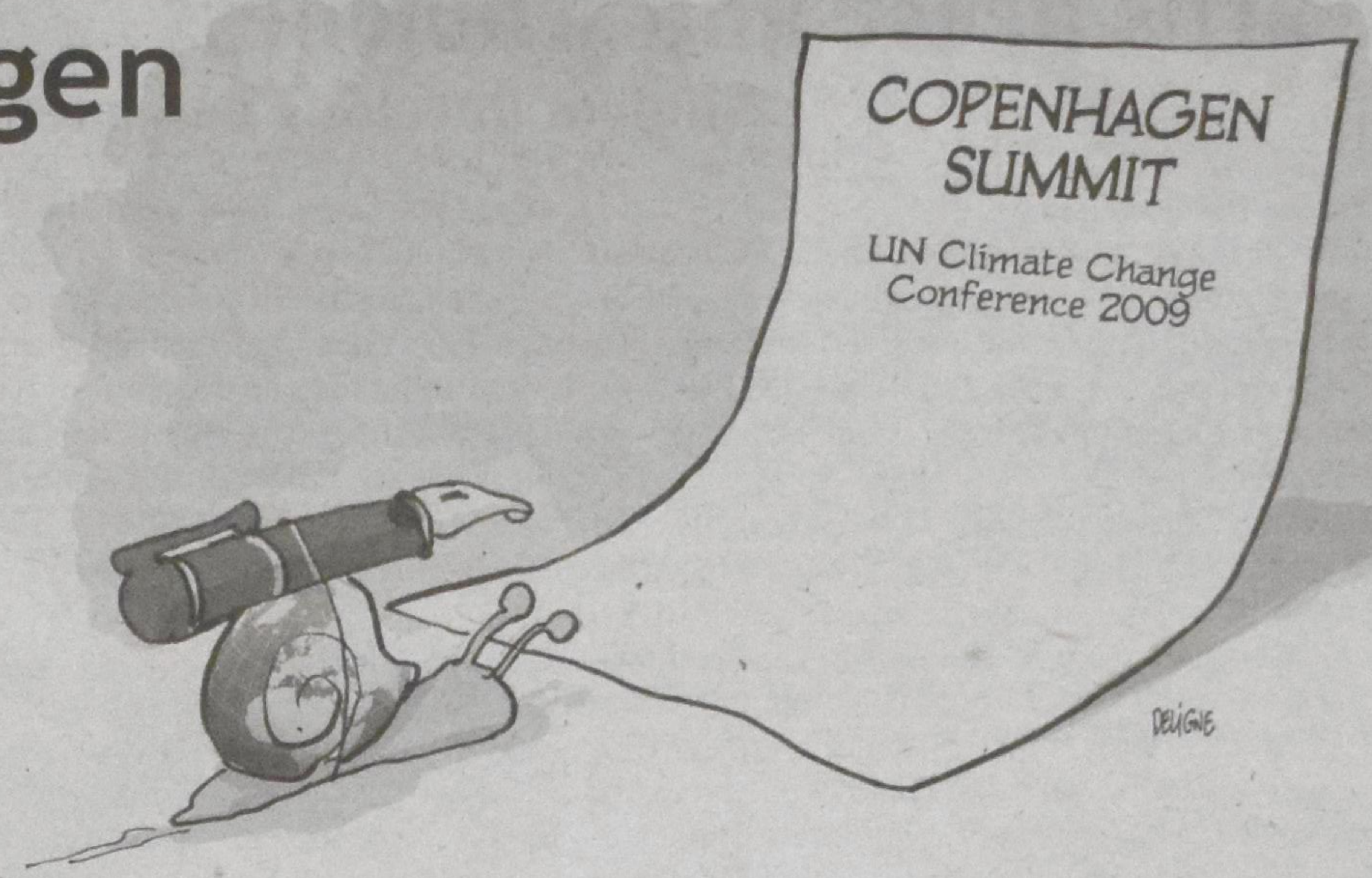
Bill & Nel Van Geest: Nate, William, Thomas, Rachel & Jeff

Peter Van Geest & Patricia Van Reenen: David & Joanna, Erika, Marijka

The funeral service was held on November 9, 2009
at Maranatha Christian Reformed Church, St. Catharines

News

Christmas in Copenhagen



Hendrik Vlaar

Forget cheesy Christmas carols and holiday re-runs: this Advent season will witness what promises to be the most thrilling showdown of the decade – that is, if international environmental politics is your thing. If so, then buckle up, because from December 7-18, the 192 member states of the United Nations are setting a course for how the international community, Canada included, will deal with current environmental challenges.

It's the fifteenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP15), held this year in Copenhagen,

Canada, in fact, is one of the worst offenders...

Denmark. Thanks to strong national and municipal policy, Copenhagen has become one of the most environmentally friendly cities in the world. From sewage treatment to alternative energy sources, the city's holistic approach to the environment, economy and urban community has made it the number one place to inhabit, visit, and conduct business. In other words, Copenhagen is the ideal location for discussing the future of our planet.

As a run-up to the event, COP members have been holding frequent meetings over the past two years on the climate and environment. Some of those members are excited for and ready to commit to change. Indeed, a few states (Denmark included) compose the vanguard of the sustainability approach to business, society, and politics. Other states (including Canada) have been slower to respond, and even accused of stymieing progress to protect their environmentally damaging markets and maintain the status quo.

Canada, in fact, is one of the worst offenders in this regard. Last October the Group of 77 (nations of the Global South) walked out on Canada at a Bangkok conference designed to compose a successor to the infamous Kyoto Protocol. The 77 took issue with Canada's unwillingness to treat Kyoto as a legally binding international agreement, an agreement which was ratified on February 16, 2005.

COP15 is about leaders, followers, and foot-draggers coming together to agree on some sort of legally binding treaty. While climate change is the central issue, it cuts across every political and economic sector of society. The conference, then, will treat each of these sectors with the purpose of providing ways to integrate viable environmental stewardship therein.

Decisions made in Copenhagen will have implications for each and every one of us. In light of this, there are some important things to watch for right now. Besides our own Canadian leaders, it will be interesting to see what kinds of statements Obama makes in the face of a faltering economy. Will he tout the "cheap and cheerful" line, or will he work towards proximal environmental justice? Another thing to keep an eye on is the relationship between the Group of 77 and the Group of 20 (finance ministers and central bank governors from 20 economies constituting 85 percent of global GNP). Wherever you live and whatever your position on climate change, this international fiesta will, indeed, have something for everyone.

Hendrik Vlaar is a Redeemer student passionate about Ecological and Aboriginal Justice, as well as food and water sovereignty. You can check out the conference's calendar of events at hhtp://en.cop15.dk/calendar. Look for Vlaar's article post-Copenhagen in an upcoming issue.

Country living

Meindert van der Galien

Hand-me-down keepsakes

I had to laugh last week while browsing in a local thrift store. The book I was buying was autographed by someone I knew and was given as a Christmas gift to a couple I also knew. It was funny seeing all three names and knowing the people. Inside the cover were a few personal thoughts, Christmas well wishes, the word "love" and a signature.

The 256-page illustrated book entitled *The Barn – A Vanishing Landmark in North America*, was the perfect book for a history-minded person like myself. And it was priced at three bucks!

It's not the first time I have been surprised with an inexpensive but appealing find. It seems when people are tired of looking at things, which include gifts and treasures, they hold a yard- or garage- sale, or they drop them off at a thrift store. Maybe that's the right thing to do. The Lord Jesus did say, "It is more blessed to give than to receive"! (Acts 20:35). I still have the Dutch books my uncle, S. M. van der Galien, a writer and author, sent us in the 1950s and 1960s. They're autographed and a keepsake – for me, anyway.

Personal message

This past summer I bought the book *Whelan*. The cover of the book has a smiling Eugene Whelan in a suit and tie and sporting his trademark green Stetson. A 310-page book on Whelan might sound like boring reading. It's actually a very interesting book.

So why did I buy a second Whelan book? It was autographed by the man himself. We were in Brockville one Saturday morning and checked out a garage sale that looked good. My wife, knowing that I thought Eugene Whelan was one of the best federal agriculture ministers and the longest serving one, handed me the book. When I opened the cover there was a full page of Whelan's handwriting. He autographed the book for a young woman who participated in the Queen of the Furrow competition in Essex County, Ont. – Whalen's home turf.

Whalen wrote: *Essex County, September 23, 1989. To:* (her full name) *Queen of the Furrow from Leeds. Please accept this book as a memento of your visit to the International Plowing Match and also for participating in the Queen of the Furrow Contest. With my Compliments and Best Wishes, Hon Eugene F. Whelan P.C.*

Inside the book is a letter from the Ontario Plowmen's Association dated September 29, 1989 and a memo to the Queen of the Furrow Contestants. It says: *Enclosed please find the autobiography of Eugene Whelan who was very kind to take the time to act as a judge and to address these books to each one of you personally.*

It was interesting finding the 20-year-old autographed book by Eugene Whelan. It looked as if it had never been read. I'm sure there are others around that people would sell for a few quarters, or just give away to a thrift store. If Whelan had been a famous rock star or a sports figure, a book on him with his signature in it would be a real keepsake. Maybe not! Times have changed!

A real champion

Older folks remember 'Gene' Whelan fondly because he stood up for farmers and didn't beat around the bush. As a backbencher under Prime Minister Pearson and as Trudeau's minister of agriculture for 12 years, he was a tough and effective spokesperson for the rights of farmers and working people all across Canada.

Whelan is also one of the few politicians in the West who can claim friendship with Mikhail Gorbachev.

"Paper doesn't feed cows and it doesn't feed people." Eugene Whelan

At 85 now, Whelan is still as feisty as ever, and he's still wearing the green hat. He was in the farm news a few weeks ago when he spoke at a ceremony marking the 100th anniversary of the Greenhouse and Processing Crops Research Centre. He said Canada's farmers are being gouged when they buy potash.

"It shouldn't cost any more than $250 a tonne. It's no better than stealing," he said. He feels there's a need for government regulation in order to put a lid on prices but politicians in Canada are mute on the matter.

Whelan still sticks up for farmers. We need agriculture ministers of his caliber – federally and especially in Ontario.

Have a Blessed Christmas, and all the best in 2010!

Meindert van der Galien (maynard@renfrew.net) is a Renfrew area farmer (Ottawa Valley) and agricultural writer.

News

Towards peace and wholeness

Shalem develops new mental health programs

Sara Gerritsma DeMoor

In the memoir *Hurry Down Sunshine*, Michael Greenberg describes the summer his teenage daughter developed bipolar disorder. From the psychotic ward, she confronts him, saying, "You want me to recover. But what have I lost? Or am I someone you want to cover up *again*. Someone you want to put a lid on?"

Christians often have an impulse to help those who are struggling in their midst, but we have not always acted in the most helpful ways when dealing with mental health issues. Sadly, people facing these issues do not always feel comfortable sharing their needs with a church community, in part because of hurtful reactions from Christians in the past. For example, when someone does make herself vulnerable and shares about her depression or anxiety with fellow Christians, too often the implicit or explicit response makes the person struggling feel like her mental health issue is really a lack of faith or trust, or that if she prayed more God would heal her. Far easier to cover up, and keep a lid on our problems.

Thankfully, churches are becoming more sensitive in dealing with difficult situations, even having money set aside in their budgets to pay for counseling. But the process of accessing this money can be an embarrassing or humiliating one for someone who needs help. Churches might require that the deacons go over the family's financial records to prove financial need, or might insist that the pastor or an elder get involved.

Two new programs offered by Shalem Mental Health Network want to combat both of these problems. "All of Shalem's programs for churches are offered in a spirit of seeking partnership with churches – to be able to help them enhance the good work that they are already doing," says Mark Vander Vennen, executive director of Shalem. "Shalem seeks partnership to enhance the common goal of reaching out to those who are hurting in the name of Christ," not to critique or condemn what churches are already doing.

Professional help

The Congregational Assistance Program (CAP) provides access to professional, Master's degree-level Christian counseling for all church members, at no cost to the individuals or families who receive the counseling. After signing up for the CAP, churches are evaluated and an annual fee based on size is set up. An average-sized church could pay approximately $40 per household per year as part of CAP, and this would be assessed periodically. Confidentiality and anonymity are protected because church members contact Shalem directly, and their church never knows which members have accessed the service. Each member is eligible for up to six counseling sessions per year, and since this is a per-person limit rather than a per-family limit, individuals or couples in the same household can each receive six sessions per year.

The Christian counselors in the CAP program must be MA-level therapists who belong to a reputable professional association and carry their own liability insurance. These criteria are particularly important since currently in Ontario there is very little regulation of counseling practices. The counselors are paid by Shalem rather than the individual, eliminating the financial obstacle.

Ripple effect

Churches benefit immensely from the CAP program as well. Without fears of embarrassment or stigma, and without the financial roadblock, church members are able to seek counseling to address personal and familial issues like grief, job loss, marital breakdown, parent-child conflict, abuse, trauma, depression or anxiety as these issues arise, and before they become debilitating crises. Churches can become healthier places for everyone when families and individuals are accessing the help they need. In addition, Shalem provides churches with quarterly reports on the usage rates, satisfaction, and the presenting issues of its members, but without any identifying information. Churches are then able to use this information to tailor their pastoral care, adult education, sermons, and other ministries to address the needs of their church community. According to Mark Vander Vennen, the goal of the CAP is "to equip churches to help meet mental health needs in their communities."

Shalem ran a three-year pilot of the CAP program with five churches across southern Ontario prior to offering the program to all churches in Ontario. The response from all five churches and the individual participants was positive, and each church continued to participate in the CAP program after the pilot was completed.

Meeting multiple needs

The second new program from Shalem is called WrapAround. Mark Vander Vennen describes it as "a way of organizing and sustaining the God-given impulses within a church to care for those who are most vulnerable in their communities – without burning out the caregivers." WrapAround is meant for persons or families who face complex challenges including, but not limited to, mental health issues. Individuals or families who participate may face mental illness, poverty, special needs, medical issues, significant behavioural issues, or other challenges. It's a life-planning process that empowers the individual or family facing challenges to use their own strengths to take steps forward.

A church's involvement in WrapAround may begin when interested members become WrapAround facilitators, trained by Shalem or other community partners. Training includes being taught the values that undergird the WrapAround process, values like "nothing about us without us," "never give up," "no blame, no shame," and "family matters." Facilitators are also trained to help discover people's strengths and culture, identify needs, and form a team to work with the participant's strengths to meet his or her needs.

When an individual or family seeks assistance from the church, the facilitator begins to make contact with the person or family in need, with the ongoing support of a WrapAround coach provided by Shalem. In conversation with the participant(s), the facilitator assesses the participant's strengths, helps the participant prioritize his or her needs, and helps the participant pull together a team of three to ten people, of the participant's own choosing. The team may include professionals or "lay" people, from within the church or the greater community, who meet regularly with the participant to strategize about how to meet his or her needs using his or her strengths and the strengths of the team and community at large.

"The Soloist" is a true story about a man with schizophrenia. The movie stars Jamie Foxx and Robert Downing, Jr.

Because the focus is on the strengths of the participants and not on quick fixes, the process usually lasts a year or longer. WrapAround facilitators and teams do not ever give up on an individual or family; if one plan doesn't adequately address their needs using their strengths, another plan will be developed. One of the greatest strengths of the WrapAround program is that it helps individuals and families in need connect with church and other communities, which in itself can be a source of strength and encouragement – not to mention that this is exactly what churches often *want* to do with those in need, but are not always equipped to do well.

The WrapAround program has also been piloted in six churches in Ontario over the past three years, and is now available to all interested churches. Many community groups also use the WrapAround program, and Shalem is actively involved in both Wrap Canada and the WrapAround Association of Ontario.

Instead of covering up those in our church communities with mental illness, we should cover them with love, and make as much support available as possible. Programs like CAP and WrapAround may help restore fellow Christians to peace and wholeness.

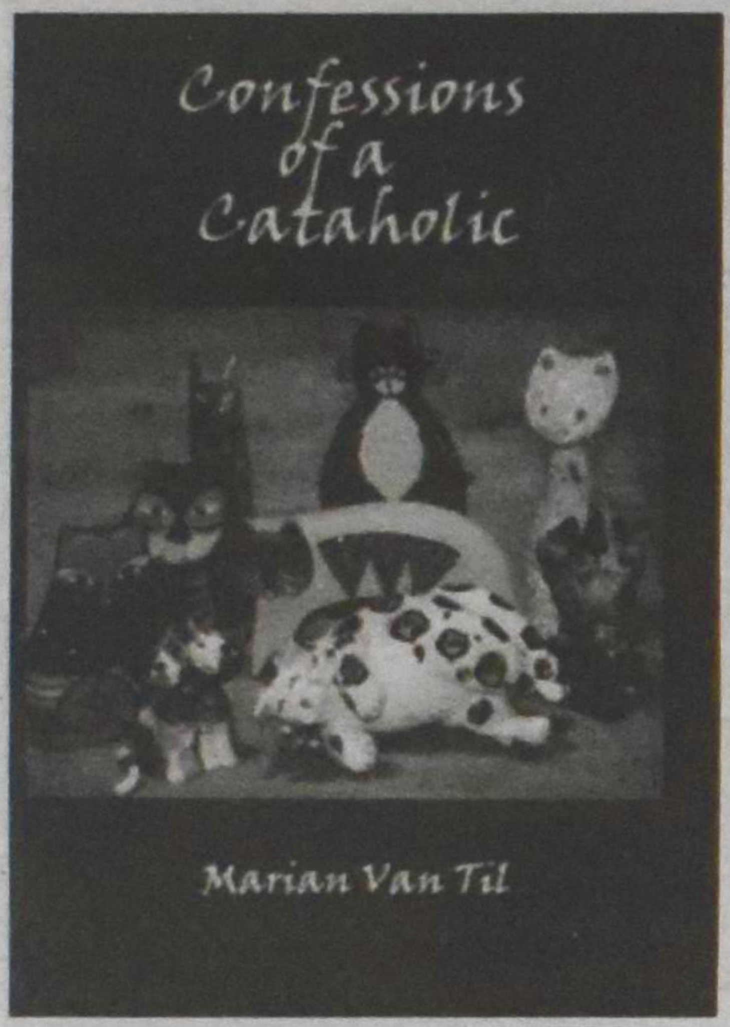
Sara Gerritsma DeMoor is an associate campus chaplain at the University of Toronto. Her interest in mental illness was fostered while at Dordt College, where she studied psychology for a year before completing a BA in political studies.

If you or your church is interested in the CAP, please contact Marg Smit-Vandezande at Shalem at (905) 515-4758. If you would like more information about WrapAround, please contact Elske de Visch Eybergen, Director of WrapAround Services at Shalem, at 1-866-347-0041. More information about these and many other resources available through Shalem Mental Health Network can be found at www.shalemnetwork.org.

New name for a familiar organization

In February of 2009 the members of Salem unanimously adopted a resolution that changed the name of the organization from Salem to Shalem Mental Health Network. The name change was necessary because of the associations of "Salem" to the witch-burning episodes that occurred in Salem, Massacheusetts in early U.S. history. This association could not have been known by Salem's visionary founders, who were European immigrants for whom 'salem' was the Anglicized version of "shalem" or "shalom" and had associations of peace, justice, and wholeness rather than witch-burning. The name change reaffirms this original intent of Salem's founders, returning to the original biblical Hebrew word Shalem to clear up the confusion.

Confessions of a Cataholic



Confessions of a Cataholic: My Life With the 10 Cats Who Caused My Addiction by Marian Van Til (WordPower Publishing, 2009)

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Like the poet Christopher Smart (1722-1771) in his *Jubilate Agno*, Marian Van Til and her husband Ed's cats have been and are creatures "from whom we have taken occasion to bless Almighty God." Christopher Smart, considered insane because of what he wrote, was incarcerated. Tongue in cheek, Marian comments, "Clearly, he was a cataholic too. I'm just glad *my* friends don't have the power to lock me up. Not yet, anyway."

Not children

Raised by parents who considered cats outdoor pets, Marian nevertheless convinced her dad that she needed an indoor cat. He complied. Thus began Marian's cataholic journey. Ten cats later, Marian has a wealth of experiences, stories, advice, and wisdom for cat lovers.

The fact that Marian and Ed have not been blessed with children has been "a major reason we decided to try to rescue as many cats as we reasonably could in our lifetime together." However, Marian and Ed didn't allow themselves to make the mistake that many pet owners do. "We agreed from the start that our cats should never be seen as children, as many people do see their cats or dogs. They are cats, not human beings."

Still, Marian and Ed celebrate cats as "marvellous creatures of God, doing daily the wonderful, comic, exasperating, affectionate catly things God created them to do. And that, surely, is enough reason to value them, love them and grieve them when they slip from our care."

A time to grieve

And grieve Marian and Ed did! Over a period of time, several of their cats became deathly ill. Often, Marian prayed for her pets. She writes, "If God sees the sparrow fall, and cares when it falls … surely he cares about the lives and futures of all the animals he created, including our pets. I had no qualms at all about praying . . . though of course I realized that God's answer might not be the answer we wanted."

Often, God's answer wasn't what Marian and Ed desired. Then they had to make the gut-wrenching decision to either do whatever they could to k

for the conscientious couple. Because they "want to be good Christian stewards of whatever resources God sees fit to give us," Marian and Ed struggled with this question: "How much money should we or could we conscientiously spend on the healthcare of our pets?" Marian points to Proverbs 12:10 – "A righteous man cares for the needs of his animals" – as a biblical guideline. Dealing with this issue in a Christian manner means not doing away with animals because you don't want to spend money on their health care, while at the same time not committing "the sin of excess" by diverting necessary money from charities and family needs.

Marian's stories of Marple, Delta, Maple, Dancer, Digory, Caspian, Cassie, Keeley, Roo, and Hedwig reveal not only these cats' characters, but also those of their owners. Compassionate, loving, and generous, Marian and Ed have and continue to celebrate cats with all their quirks, idiosyncrasies, and foibles.

Confessions of a Cataholic is available by contacting cataholic@wordpowerpublishing.com

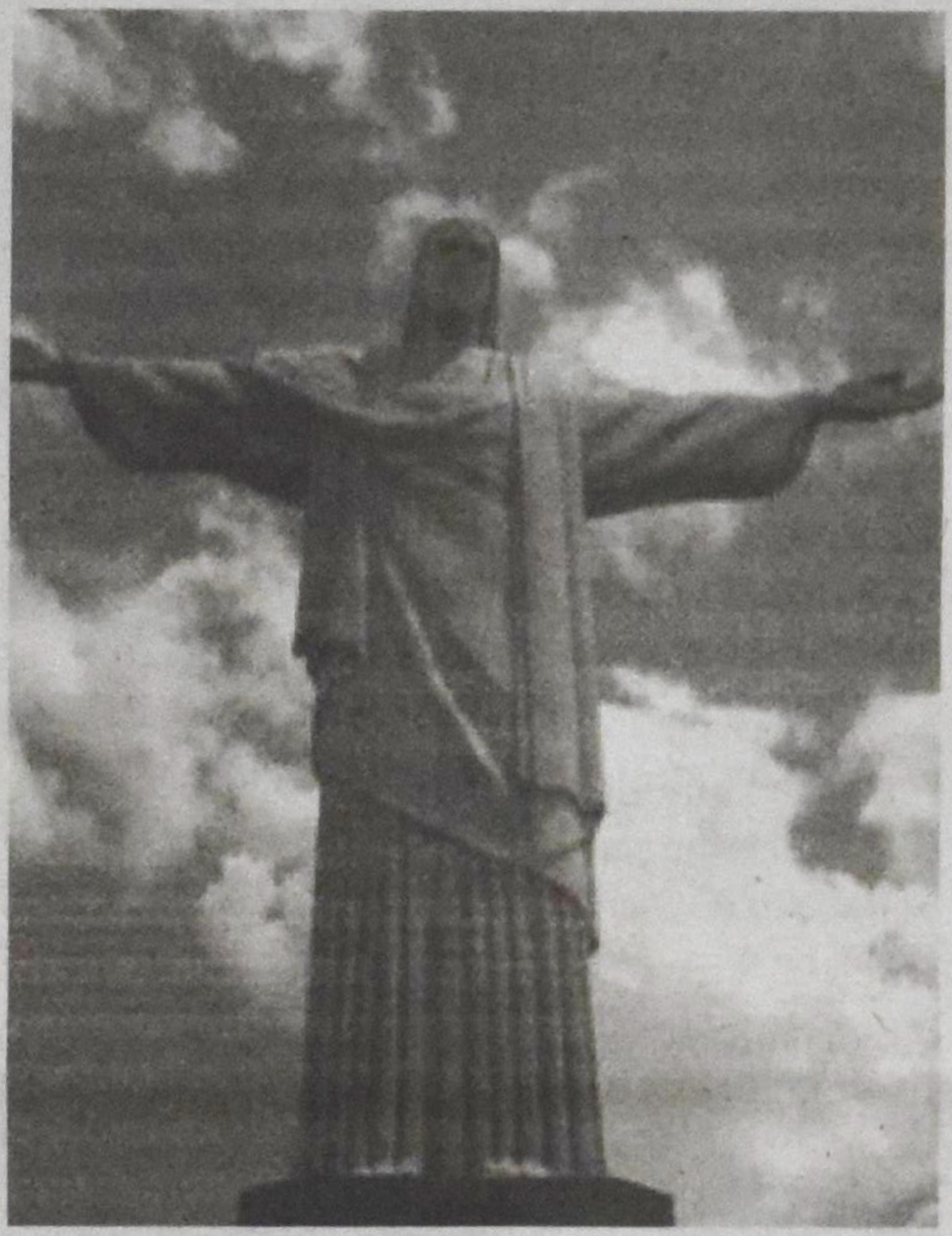
Sonya VanderVeen Feddema is a freelance writer living in St. Catharines, ON. She has recently published her first children's picture book, Monzi and Mama's Stories, copies of which can be ordered at sonyavf55@hotmail.com.

Christmas in April

Dora Stroobosscher

Somewhere, and I do not remember where, I read the following story:

An old Italian movie opens with the shot of a helicopter moving a giant statue of Jesus from Venice to Rome. Arms outstretched, Jesus hangs in a sling, and as the helicopter passes over the landscape, people begin to recognize him. An old farmer looks up to see his Saviour dangling in the air and simply shakes his head. A young boy, playing soccer with this friends, shouts, "Hey, it's Jesus" and leaves the game to run along with the helicopter. Closer to Rome, two young girls sunbathing at a resort also recognize who is floating above them and wave a friendly greeting. Silently, the concrete Jesus floats above the modern world.



Do you ever imagine Jesus to be like that, a somewhat distant figure who hovers above the earth, hands outstretched in a benevolent blessing?

Maybe you prefer the image of the Good Shepherd, a bearded, good-looking young man carrying a lamb?

Or, do you think of him as the sleeping baby in a manger, surrounded by clean animals, angels, and shepherds?

Who is Jesus really?

At the home where my husband and I used to live, we had two fishponds stocked with goldfish. Every fall, we worked hard to keep leaves and other debris out of the ponds so that rotting plant matter would not create an unhealthy home for our fish during the long winter months. All winter long, we trudged through snow and cold to poke holes through ice-covered ponds so that the water could be oxygenated. Every spring, we cleaned the water and pulled out unhealthy plants. Then, we would wait, wait until one or two goldfish came to the surface again after spending the winter at the bottom of the pond. That was our cue to drop just a small amount of fish food into the water. For us, seeing the splashes of orange playing tag again was always a welcome sight. Not so for them!

You would think that the fish would be thankful for all we had done. They at least could have given us a fishy welcome with a flip of a golden fin. Instead, every time we walked on the little bridge that crossed the pond, they would disappear. Every time our shadow fell across the water, they would head for the bottom. They showed only one emotion: fear!

Then, one day we sat down on the little bridge and dangled our bare legs in the water. To our surprise, the fish came to us, first one, then many, swarming around our feet and giving our ankles little goldfish kisses. Then we understood. We had to be a part of their world. We had to immerse ourselves in the muddy waters of a pond in order for them to trust us. We had to become just a bit like them.

Christ at creation

We understood much more that day. It came to us with new clarity that Jesus had done exactly that. Of his own free will, he had come to reach out and save frightened and thankless humans. And he had acted even *before* they had begun to fear him. John Milton, in a long poem called *Paradise Lost*, creates a picture of what might have taken place. God the Father looks down to see Adam and Eve enjoying their garden home. However, hovering on the edge of the newly created world, Almighty Father also sees Satan and knows of his diabolical plan. An anguished God already knows the choice that Adam and Eve are about to make. How can he save them from eternal death?

But wait! God the Son steps forward. "Let me satisfy your justice!" The angels break out in song! "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God."

Father God then finds his frightened crowns of creation. He comes not with the angry voice of condemnation, but with a grace-filled plan of redemption. God the Son will crush the power of Satan! God himself will buy back his own.

Much later, in the fullness of time, the angels sang again: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace towards humans on whom his favour rests."

That night, God walked on to a bridge called earth and then lowered himself into the cold sin-filled water of hunger, pain, sorrow and death on a cross. He got right down into the muddy fishpond of humanity. How else could we have learned to trust and love him, to come to him unafraid, with kisses of praise and thanksgiving? He humbled himself, became like us and walked obediently to the cross. Then, Father God exalted him, called him Jesus. And at that name, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil.2:6-11)!

That year, on our little bridge, we celebrated Christmas in April!

Dora Stroobosscher (dora.stroo@cogeco.ca) is a retired elementary school teacher who with her husband Marc lives in St. Catharines, Ontario.

Church

Italian school crucifixes outlawed

Marian Van Til

RICHMOND, B.C. – The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) regularly asks Christians to pray about religious liberty issues around the world. In its latest Religious Liberty Prayer News bulletin it calls attention to persecution against Christians in a seemingly unlikely place: Italy.

Persecution today takes different forms from country to country and region to region, the WEA notes. "The form of persecution in Europe in the days we live in could be most broadly described as aggressive attempts to silence Christianity and delete it from the public arena on the basis of humanistic human rights interpretation."

The latest evidence for that is the most recent decision of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. That Court has issued an order "finding that the mere presence of the crucifix in Italian public school classrooms constitutes a violation of the European Convention of Human Rights," reports the WEA.

Part of the Human Rights Court's decision states that the crucifixes are seen as favouring christianity and therefore oppressing other religions.

The WEA is urging Christians worldwide to pray for God to "move" in Italy, providing what it terms "well-equipped modern day worriers and watchmen for religious freedom in Europe." It also asks for prayers for spiritual strength and wisdom for the church in Europe so that it can stand against Satan's plans to silence Christianity on that continent.

The WEA describes itself as "a network of churches in 128 nations that have each formed an evangelical alliance and over 100 international organizations joining together to give a worldwide identity, voice and platform to more than 420 million evangelical Christians." They believe that "in seeking holiness, justice and renewal at every level of society - individual, family, community and culture, God is glorified and the nations of the earth are forever transformed." The group's operations and leadership office is in Richmond, B.C.

Christmas replaced by a disco

DUNDEE, Scotland (CI) – The Dundee city council in Scotland has decided to remove all reference to Christmas in its festive light switch-on ceremony this year. The Nativity story has also been dropped from the event, which will instead feature a disco, a contemporary circus, a continental market and a fairy on stilts. The event has also been renamed; it is now the Dundee Winter Light Night.

Far from being inoffensive, Rev. Allan Webster has said, "The general feeling is that calling it the Winter Light Night rather than the Christmas Lights is an erosion of a religious festival." Reverend Webster had delivered last years Christmas message, which has also been removed.

Meanwhile, the Presbytery of Dundee of the Church of Scotland – the state church – voted to voice their concern to the city council.

In past years other local authorities have tried to remove the Christian aspect of Christmas from their festive celebrations. Last year in November an attempt by the Oxford city council to drop Christmas from the title of the city's celebrations was condemned by both residents and religious leaders. These and similar actions, not just in Britain but in Europe and North America, are increasingly common in a bid to be "inoffensive" to non-Christians regarding Christmas.

Dordt celebrates John Calvin

SIOUX CENTER, Iowa (DC) – Dordt College celebrated the 500th birthday of John Calvin last month in a "Calvin, Worship, and the Arts Workshop" that involved representatives of several Christian Reformed Church agencies and organizations.

Hosted by Dordt's Andreas Center and the college's music department, the event began with a performance of "A Symphony of Psalms" by the Boston Camerata, which performed a program of Genevan Psalms and Psalm-based music from the Reformation era. The musical settings included psalms of supplication, praise, and wisdom and grace.

Guest speakers and workshops followed the next day, each focusing on comparisons and contrasts between early Genevan and present-day worship practices. A dozen guest speakers from CRR-related institutions, publications and organizations – Dordt, Calvin College and Seminary, the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Back to God Ministries International, and the *Reformed Worship* journal – all gave presentations at the conference.

Dr. Karin Maag

Keynote addresses were given by Dr. Karin Maag, director of the Meeter Center at Calvin College, and Dr. Duane Kelderman, professor of Preaching and Vice President for Administration at Calvin Theological Seminary and co-author of *Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture.*

Change was hard

In one of the two major addresses of the event Dr. Karin Maag described how faith was lived among the community of practicing Catholics in Geneva in 1520. But, she said, things changed by 1536 when the Reformation came to Geneva: presenting sermons instead of observing the Mass; speaking in French instead of Latin; singing Psalms instead of listening to organ music; and removing iconic statues from sanctuaries as a "guard against idolatry."

"The process of change was not obvious, it was hard," Maag asserted, just as it is in present day worship.

Continuing on that theme, in the other major address Duane Kelderman shared a "helicopter view" of modern worship in the CRC as seen from his post at Calvin Seminary. Kelderman noted remarkable modern shifts, such as using the arts in worship, but sees many strong Calvinistic "accents" continuing to shape and nurture Christian worship. Modern Calvinist accents include deep respect for Scripture as the inspired Word of God; an affinity for beginning our story at Creation; an emphasis on grace and what God has done; a rich sense of Covenant between God and his people; recognition of the Holy Spirit as the source of empowerment in Christian life; gratitude for what God has done for us; a commitment to the church as the Body of Christ, and a sense of vocation and holy calling on our lives.

Workshops following the addresses delved into all aspects of worship, from the use of visual arts and media technology to newly composed contemporary songs.

Lutheran church splits

Marian Van Til, *with files from CORE and LCMS*

ST. LOUIS, Missouri – In August of this year the Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the largest Lutheran church in the U.S., voted to open its ministry positions to homosexual and lesbian pastors and other professional works living in "committed relationships."

In response to that move and the ongoing erosion of reliance on the truth of Scripture in the denomination, a group of church members who are part of a Lutheran Coalition for Renewal (CORE) are now working on forming a new Lutheran denomination.

CORE, currently headquartered in New Brighton, Minnesota, organized as "a free-standing synod for all faithful Lutherans" in September. The move was voted on by 1,200 Lutherans from throughout the U.S. and Canada.

A November press release from CORE said, in part, "the votes by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in August to allow pastors to be in committed same-sex relationships have created a biblical and theological crisis throughout the ELCA and have generated conflict in local congregations." As a result, "many congregations and individuals are considering the possibility of leaving the ELCA or have chosen to redirect giving away from the national church."

CORE leaders originally said that they would spend a year deciding whether to form a new church body. However, last month they also announced that that they would step up the pace due to the large number of requests they have received from disenfranchised congregations and church members who are seeking quicker action.

CORE leaders have not publicly talked about how many people a new Lutheran denomination might attract, but they believe there is deep opposition to the new policy of the ELCA among its members, caused by an unorthodox reading of Scripture. A committee will begin drafting a constitution and take other steps to form the yet-unnamed church body, with hopes of having the groundwork laid by August 2010.

'Be guided by the Word of God'

There is already an existing conservative Lutheran church, the Lutheran Church –Missouri Synod (LCMS) – which has a membership of 2.4 million, compared with the current 4.6 million in the ELCA. While it might seem natural to outsiders that CORE Lutherans would, or should, join existing LCMS congregations, the situation is not straightforward. The most important point of difference is that CORE Lutherans from the ELCA do not believe Scripture prohibits women pastors and elders, but the LSMS does not ordain women to any of the church offices.

Nevertheless, Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick, president of The LCMS, is watching with interest and concern the developments in the ELCA and in CORE. He issued a statement late last month in response to the new-church announcement by CORE leaders. He said that he and his church members "pray for the members of the ELCA and all other denominations facing this issue." He noted, "I have previously expressed my deep sorrow to the ELCA assembly regarding its actions and warned that its affirmation of same-gender unions and its opening of the ministry to gay and lesbian pastors and workers in 'committed relationships' would create additional stress and disharmony within the ELCA. Sadly, this has come to pass."

Kieschnick added, "We urge them to be guided by the Word of God and the consensus of 2,000 years of Christian theological affirmation regarding what Scripture teaches regarding human sexuality."

The St. Louis-based LCMS, founded in 1847, has 6,200 congregations and 9,000 pastors. The church is one of the largest Christian denominations in the U.S. It owns and operates KFUO radio, two seminaries, 10 colleges and universities and the largest Protestant parochial school system in America. The LCMS carries on mission work in 88 countries and is in "full doctrinal fellowship with 34 other confessional Lutheran church bodies on six continents." It is also a founding partner of Lutheran Services in America, a social ministry organization serving one in every 50 Americans.

Tugging on Ben Franklin's vest

Lynn Rosedale

Founding Father. Discoverer of electricity. Publisher of *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Master statesman. Signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Any of these serve as an apt descriptor of Benjamin Franklin.

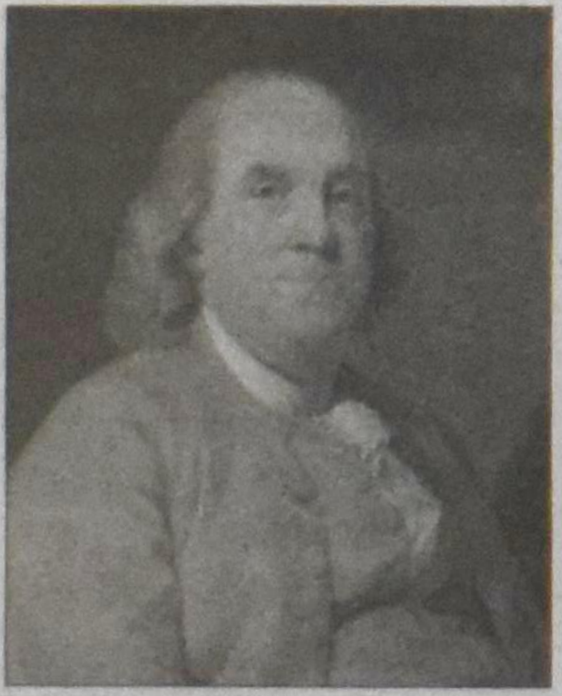
"For most people the image of Benjamin Franklin is of a fat, jolly old guy with bifocals," said Don Hettinga, Calvin professor of English. "He was so curious about everything, and he was always figuring stuff out."

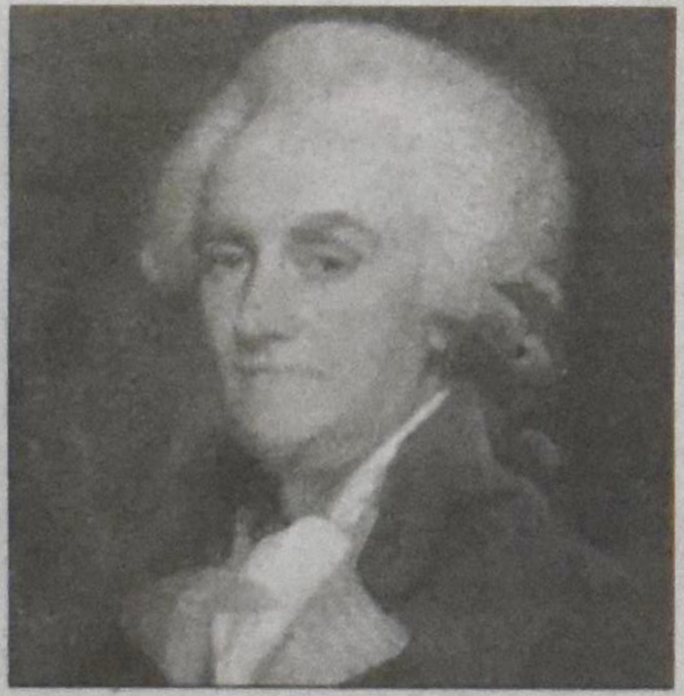
Hettinga, though, has discovered much more about the life and times of this man who helped America win its independence: "One of the wonderful things about historical or cultural research is it's so messy," he said. "You start tugging at a loose string on Ben Franklin's vest and lots of things start unravelling."

Philadelphia research

Hettinga spent the past summer in Philadelphia researching several mid-18th-century Pennsylvania residents for a possible historical novel. His work was supported by a grant from the Calvin Alumni Association. Ben Franklin and his less-prominent son William quickly became central to his study.

"I found a lot of potential for a story about Ben Franklin through the eyes of William, his illegitimate son," said Hettinga. "When I thought about a story about Ben Franklin for young adults, I imagined either a lot of patriotic cheerleading or eye rolling from kids. But looking at his life through this relationship with his son seemed like a good way into it. There is a love-hate relationship there."





Ben Franklin (L) and William Franklin (R).

A novel idea becomes reality

The historical-novel idea turned into a prospective biography of William Franklin. "As William was growing up there were significant things the two participated in together," said Hettinga. "They did the electrical experiments together, and the two Franklins worked together to convince Philadelphia to put together a militia at the start of the French and Indian War."

But when young William decided to remain a Loyalist, the elder Franklin took issue with that decision. This is when we see a darker side of Benjamin, according to Hettinga.

William was imprisoned during the Revolution, and Ben kept William's wife from communicating with him. He also took William's son Temple to France and after the Revolution used Temple as leverage against William.

"He uses his personal relationships; he's very manipulative," Hettinga explained.

Assembling all of these lesser-known facts together in a biography should offer new insight into William and Benjamin Franklin and, hopefully, make for interesting reading among young adults, Hettinga said.

Timeless lessons

While based on people from the 18th century, many of the lessons are timeless: "It's an interesting generational thing. It's about parents who aren't as educated, who sacrifice to give their children better, and then the children learn different values and it causes real tension," he said.

While the anticipated book is a variation of Hettinga's original plan, it fits well with his interest: "I've always been in the area between literature and history," he said. "I have an interest in the relationship of story and history."

He has some practice as a biographer as well. Hettinga penned *The Brothers Grimm* (Clarion Books, 2001), a biography of the German fairy-tale writing duo.

A classroom experience

His main ambition for the project, though, is to bring the experience into the classroom. "Doing this kind of research gives me an opportunity to learn," he said. "It keeps me a perpetual student. I think that's important for a teacher. If we are learners as well as teachers, one hopes that we can let that excitement show in the classroom. We're excited about discovering new things."

Besides the excitement for learning, Hettinga hopes to bring real lessons to the classroom. "For my feature writing class, I'd like to have them take an incident from history, something maybe that I discovered while reading Ben Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*, and write about it for a popular audience that would read about history.

"It's a challenge for me because I would be writing with them, and we could be sharing drafts. It makes for a powerful learning moment about the reality of writing: that it is always a process."

Lynn Rosedale works in communications and marketing at Calvin College.

Pope to universities:
Reunite faith and culture

VATICAN CITY (CNA)–Pope Benedict XVI met with professors and students of Roman Pontifical Universities last month to discuss what he called the "urgent need, which still persists today, to overcome the separation between faith and culture."

Speaking as well to participants in the International Federation of Catholic Universities (FIUC), the Pope drew from John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution *Sapienta christiana* ("Christian Wisdom"), which has its 30th anniversary this year.

The concepts of *Sapienta christiana*, the Pope said, "still retain their validity. Indeed in modern society where knowledge is becoming ever more specialized and sectorial, but is profoundly marked by relativism, it is even more necessary to open oneself to the wisdom which comes from the Gospel."

He continued, "Man, in fact, is incapable of gaining a full understanding of himself and the world without Jesus Christ. He alone illuminates man's true dignity, his vocation and ultimate destiny, and opens his heart to a firm and lasting hope."

Benedict then engaged the students and professors in a discussion of methods for reuniting faith and culture. He called for "a greater commitment to evangelization in the firm conviction that Christian Revelation is a transforming power. It is capable of illuminating, purifying and renewing man's conduct and his cultures and must remain the focal point for teaching and research."

Professors and students "must never lose sight of the goal to be pursued," the Pope asserted. That goal is " becoming instruments for the announcement of the Gospel."

Benedict concluded by saying, "Catholic universities, faithful to an identity which makes a specific point of Christian inspiration, are called to promote a 'new humanistic synthesis,' knowledge that is 'wisdom capable of directing man in the light of his first beginnings and his final ends,' knowledge illuminated by faith."

Big-city school and a biblical worldview

Marian Van Til

NEW YORK – The largest, busiest, brashest city on the North American continent is not entirely a habitat for weirdness or a den of iniquity, as many non-urban dwellers like to think. Not only does it harbor biblically orthodox churches but it is home to excellent Christian education as well.

One source of an unusual Christian education is the Geneva School, on 57th Street in the heart of Manhattan. The school, its two women-founders say, "exists to provide a time-proven classical education within a biblical worldview." The school's goals toward that end are to "nurture Christ-centered faith and character," to "engage the mind and nourish the spirit" and to "instill a lifetime love of learning."

The pre-K through Grade 8 school emphasizes that "biblical truth is taught as an integral part of all subjects." It was founded in 1995 by a music teacher and a math teacher, Myrna Anderson and Rim An Hinckley, and a committee of colleagues and parents, and opened in 1996.

When Geneva School says its approach to teaching is classical, it *means* it. Faculty members are trained in classical pedagogy and its curriculum uses the Latin "trivium" model which divides the years of the students' education into three phases: grammar, dialectic and rhetoric. The grammar phase (K-4 or "Lower School") inculcates basics. In the dialectic phase (Gr. 5-8 or "Upper School") students begin to "think critically about the facts they've learned and are able to apply knowledge, historical context, and fine points of logic." And in the rhetoric phase students develop "exceptional writing and oratory abilities." Not surprisingly, one of the "classical" subjects offered is Latin.

Students at Geneva *gather in front of their building.*

The discipline required for careful reading and study of the Bible and applying its principles to all of life go very well with the discipline of this approach to education, the school believes. Its graduates have shown that not only does this approach inculcate a biblical worldview, but gives students an all-round excellent education, allowing them to enter the cities' best high schools.

Christmas

Mary's Magnificat

Like everyone else, she received the news of Elizabeth's pregnancy with joy, wonder … and fear.

Joy that the barren had conceived.
Joy that an heir would be born.
Joy that Elizabeth's womb would bear fruit.

Wonder because of the memories this evoked.
Wonder in the memory of Sarah, Rebekah and Hannah.
Wonder about whether God was on the move, whether the promises were to be fulfilled.

Promises and wonder.
Fulfilled dreams.
All bound up with a newly conceived child.

Maybe that is where the fear came from.
A child born into oppression.
A child born into captivity.
A child born into violence.
A child born while Herod is on the throne.

And so it wasn't surprising that she made haste to visit Elizabeth.
It wasn't surprising that her own pregnancy,
mysteriously announced by an angel,
immaculately conceived without the aid of a man,
sent her running to Elizabeth.

Surely Elizabeth would understand.
Surely Elizabeth would find a way to put together
the joy, the wonder and the fear.

And when she walked into Elizabeth's house,
she could see that baby jump in her kinswoman's womb
from the other side of the room.
This was no little 'kick.'
This was one leaping baby.

And Elizabeth's cry wasn't one of shock, or pain, or discomfort,
but a cry of joy:
"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to see me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Is this what Mary was looking for?
Did this explain the joy, the wonder, the fear of it all?
A leaping fetus?
The mother of the Lord?
A fulfillment of what was spoken?
The Son of the Most High?
The heir of David?
The one whose kingdom will have no end?
In this womb?
Elizabeth's Lord, her child's Lord, Mary's Lord, in this womb?

If it is all true, then surely this calls for a song.
Surely, it is praise time.
Surely, it is a time for magnificat!

And so she sings,
in solidarity with her foremothers, she sings,
in continuity with her deepest traditions, she sings,
in a hope and a joy that simply cannot be bound, she sings.

She sings in joy,
she sings to Elizabeth,
she sings to us,
she sings to God.
The mighty one,
the merciful one,
the holy one,
has lived up to his name!

He has looked upon his servant,
his maidservant, Mary,
he has looked upon his servant,
his covenant servant, Israel,
and he has shown favour to the lowliness of such servants,
the lowliness of a pregnant teenage peasant girl,
the lowliness of an oppressed people subject to yet one more damn empire.

And the mighty one,
the merciful one,
the holy one,
has made choices.

He chooses for the weak against the powerful,
he chooses for the poor against the rich,
he chooses for the hungry against those who are overfed.

This is covenantal faithfulness,
this is the God who keeps promise,
this is the God of steadfast love,
this is the God of Abraham and our ancestors!

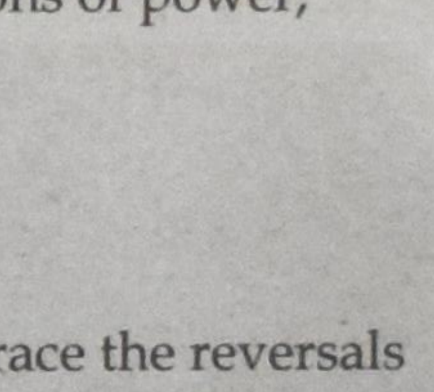
This is a God who sets people free from their captivity,
this is an exodus God of liberation,
this is a God of radical reversals,
this is a God who deconstructs the intellectual systems of the proud
who brings down the powerful from their positions of power,
who leaves the overly consumptive rich with nothing,
while lifting the lowly,
and filling the hungry.

Who sings this song?
A pregnant peasant girl in Galilee.
Whose song is this?
The song of the lowly and the hungry.

Can we sing this song?
Can we who are amongst the economic elite of our world,
can we who are in positions of power,
can we who are well-fed,
can we who are rich,
can we sing this song?

Dare we sing this song?
Only if we are willing to embrace the reversals of this Kingdom,
only if we are willing to make the same choices as this God,
only if we are willing to stand with this pregnant teenager,
only if we are willing to be scattered in our pride,
and gathered in humility,
only if we are willing to be brought down from our thrones,
and lifted up with the lowly,
only if we are willing to be sent away empty,
and fed in our deepest hunger.

Babylon is falling,
and Mary is singing.
Babylon is falling,
and the promises are fulfilled.
Babylon is falling,
and the Kingdom is at hand.



Brian Walsh is a CRC Campus Minister at the University of Toronto where he also teaches theology of culture and pastors the Wine Before Breakfast community. His most recent book (co-authored with Steven Bouma-Prediger) is Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement (Eerdmans, 2008).

Christmas and the cross

Frank Sawyer

Paul Molnar-C. (in Hungarian *Molnár-C. Pál*) was a famous Hungarian artist (1894-1981). His father was Josef Molnar and his mother, born in France, was Jeanne Contat. The 'C.' added to Paul's name represents his mother's family name. The artist is known for his bright coloured paintings on many themes, including several paintings depicting the *Annunciation*, *Child in Bethlehem*, and *The Flight to Egypt*.

Mary did not know the future; but we know what it became: the cross.

"Angelic Greeting" by Paul Molnar-C

Angelic Greeting

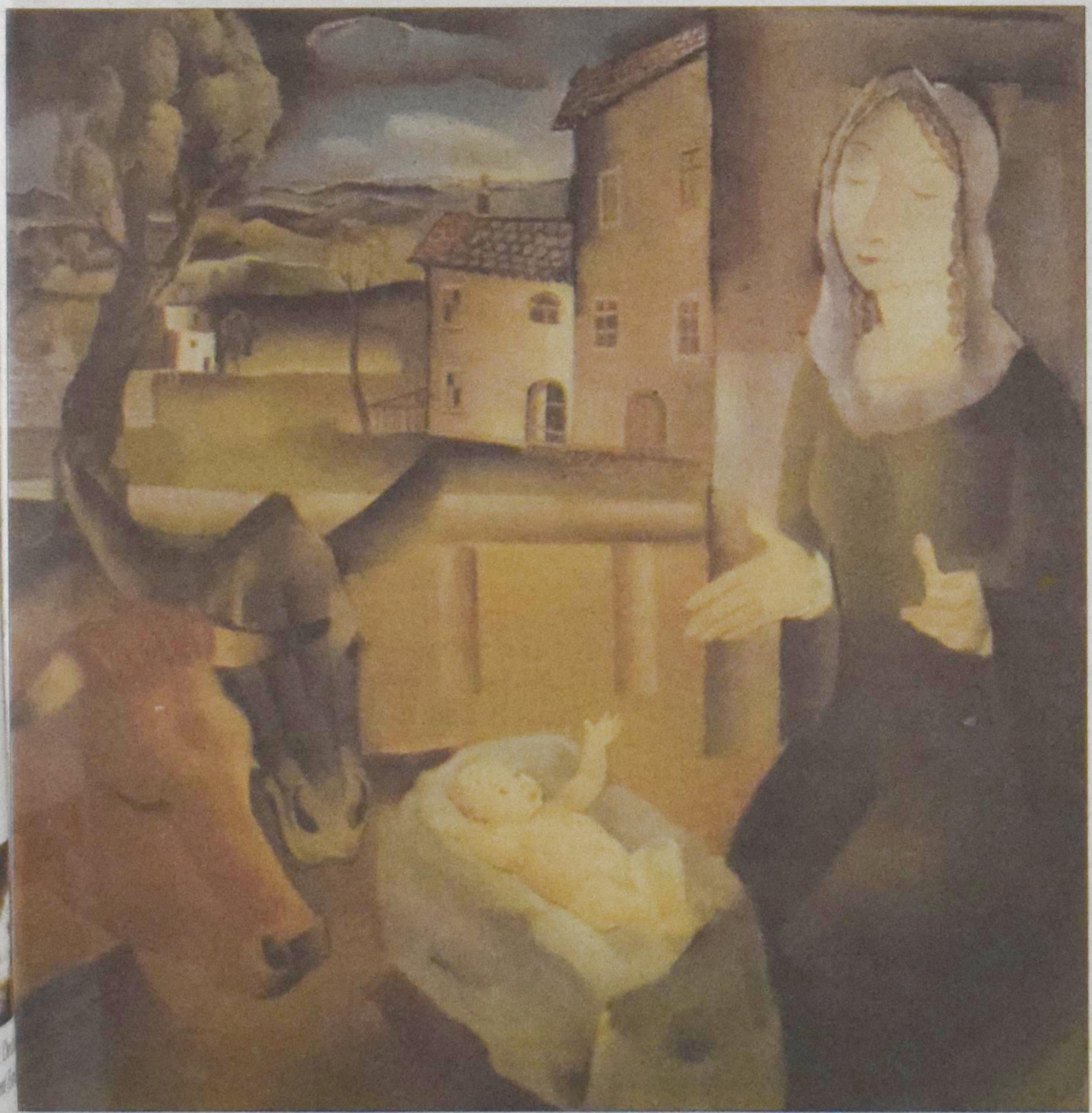
The first painting displayed here, entitled *Angelic Greeting*, shows the dynamic moment of the announcement of the holy conception and the incarnation. The forked lightning line along Mary's and Gabriel's garments very fittingly displays the power of the moment. That is why the poem says that the 'gleaming news' came in an 'electrifying' manner. The poem takes the different coloured robes to symbolize heaven and earth. Mary is in a blue robe, which turns green when it reflects the gold from Gabriel's garment. The artist uses purity of colours to represent the purity of the moment. Gabriel's face expresses a serious joy, Mary's a questioning seriousness. The lightning moment cannot be denied. But as the poem says, this announcement and this coming of God among us defies time and place and denies explanation.

Evening in Bethlehem

In the second painting, *Evening in Bethlehem*, Mary is indeed in green. The colours are subdued because of the evening darkness. Yet everything is painted with the same clarity and simplicity typical of Paul Molnar-C.'s work. The scene is peaceful and the darkness does not dominate. However the very peacefulness is a prelude to the shadow side the poem points to. Mary did not know the future; but we know what it became: the cross.

The artist painted two aspects of the way of the Word in these two paintings. The poem unites more aspects: the annunciation, Bethlehem, and the cross. There was enough seriousness on the faces in *Angelic Greeting* and enough shadow in *Evening in Bethlehem* to remind us that the cross cannot be forgotten. But there is also enough gold in *Angelic Greeting* and enough light reflecting in *Evening in Bethlehem* to underscore the hope of the Word become human, who dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

"Evening in Bethlehem" by Paul Molnar-C



Frank Sawyer lives in Hungary and has worked with CRWM for the last 17 years.

Gabriel in Gold

A reflection on Paul Molnar C.'s paintings

When the gleaming news came
it came as an electrifying
and so unexpected Word.
No one had ever dreamed nor heard
about the divine becoming human -
such power of long borne grace
turning the world about face.
through just one Word.

Becoming human?
This thought
is like a spark
defying time and place
jumping in the dark
finding no resting place
denying to be explained -
yet what was born was grace.

Perhaps after a long while
we see that eternal grace
came with a finite infant cry
and a golden divine smile:
Gabriel in gold the story told
leaving Mary to ask how and why.

Gabriel in gold
Mary in blue
and in green
heaven and earth
meet in between
through a Word
more true
and more bold
than ever dreamed
or ever told.

The dream of the divine
becoming human.

Bethlehem on a clear and quiet night
all the colours are pastels of peace
even the cattle are looking content
everything seems for once so right:
no one dreams of Herod's sword tonight
no one knows why sorrows increase
no one sees the long road to the cross
no one knows how divine tears flow
no one understands the cost of grace.

We do not know.

Gabriel in gold
Mary in green
heaven and earth
meet in between
through the way
to the cross
from where we heard
the voice of the Word:

Father
forgive
them.

Frank Sawyer

Family

From Toddlers to Teens

by Denise Dykstra

It doesn't have to be a stressful time

Overwhelmed – that's the word I would use to describe myself right now. I'm overwhelmed. My life is overwhelming. I have five kids to care for, a house to keep clean, and a husband who needs my attention. Never mind the school and church committees I'm part of, the work I do, and the friends and family I should be spending time with. Sometimes it's all just too much.

Have any of you other parents ever felt this way? I'm sure you have. I can't tell by looking at you, as you probably can't tell by looking at me, but I'm positive we've all been overwhelmed at one time or another.

I know I'm not the best parent I can be when I'm harried. I tend to put too much emphasis on mundane things – cooking, cleaning – when I'm feeling overburdened. Just the other day I ignored my six-year-old's pleas to sit on the couch with her and read a book because I *needed* to empty the dishwasher. I'm shaking my head even as I type this.

Research results

We're smack in the middle of the Christmas season, one of the most stressful times of the year. I thought it would be timely to do some research on what can we do to stay sane this Yuletide when we're particularly overloaded. Besides quitting everything and holing up in our houses, here are two suggestions I found that I believe have a lot of merit.

Suggestion number one: create routine. The idea behind creating routine is that, when you have a system in place, you have assurance that all the things that need to get done will get done. For instance, when you set specific bedtimes, you ensure that everyone gets enough sleep and (hopefully) is happy the following day. When you set specific homework times, you guarantee your kids get their assignments completed and don't have to panic the next morning to finish up before school. When you set specific grocery shopping times, you arrange for there to be enough food in the house that no one has to run out at the last minute to pick something up to put on the dinner table.

Routine doesn't allow for frenzy and uncertainty. It ensures tranquility by providing a sense of control. And the best part is that it's not difficult to establish. All it takes is the regular scheduling of daily and weekly chores.

Stress reducers

While creating routine, it's a good idea to pay special attention to responsibilities that you find particularly stressful. This is sanity suggestion number two: make a list of all the things that cause you anxiety and then make a plan to deal with them one at a time.

I was able to do this recently in my own home. I always find it difficult to keep up with laundry when I'm busy. A large family makes for a large amount of laundry, and, after I've washed and dried all of it, I never seem to be able to get it put away. I finally decided to buy a large plastic container for each member of our household, and I began to empty the drier straight into the appropriate containers. Now each of us grabs our bucket and brings all the clothes in it into our bedroom to hang up, or we grab an outfit from our bucket the morning of the day we're going to wear it. Either way, a load of stress has been lifted off my shoulders.

This is just one example of making a plan to ease the burden of a chore that's particularly stressful. There are many others that are unique to the holiday season. Do you find Christmas baking too time-consuming? How about hosting a cookie exchange so others will share the workload. Are you frustrated with the amount of driving you're doing to and from Christmas pageant practices? Why not arrange a car pool with parents who live close by. Does cooking a large Christmas meal on your own feel like a huge burden? Maybe a potluck dinner is a possibility instead.

No matter what it is that stresses you, there will always be a way to alleviate the anxiety. God himself promises that in the Bible. "(God) will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in (him)," Isaiah reminds all of us in chapter 26:3. Perfect peace – just what we need when we're feeling crushed by the weight of being overwhelmed. Once again we can take comfort in the fact that we're not alone.

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Intangible Things

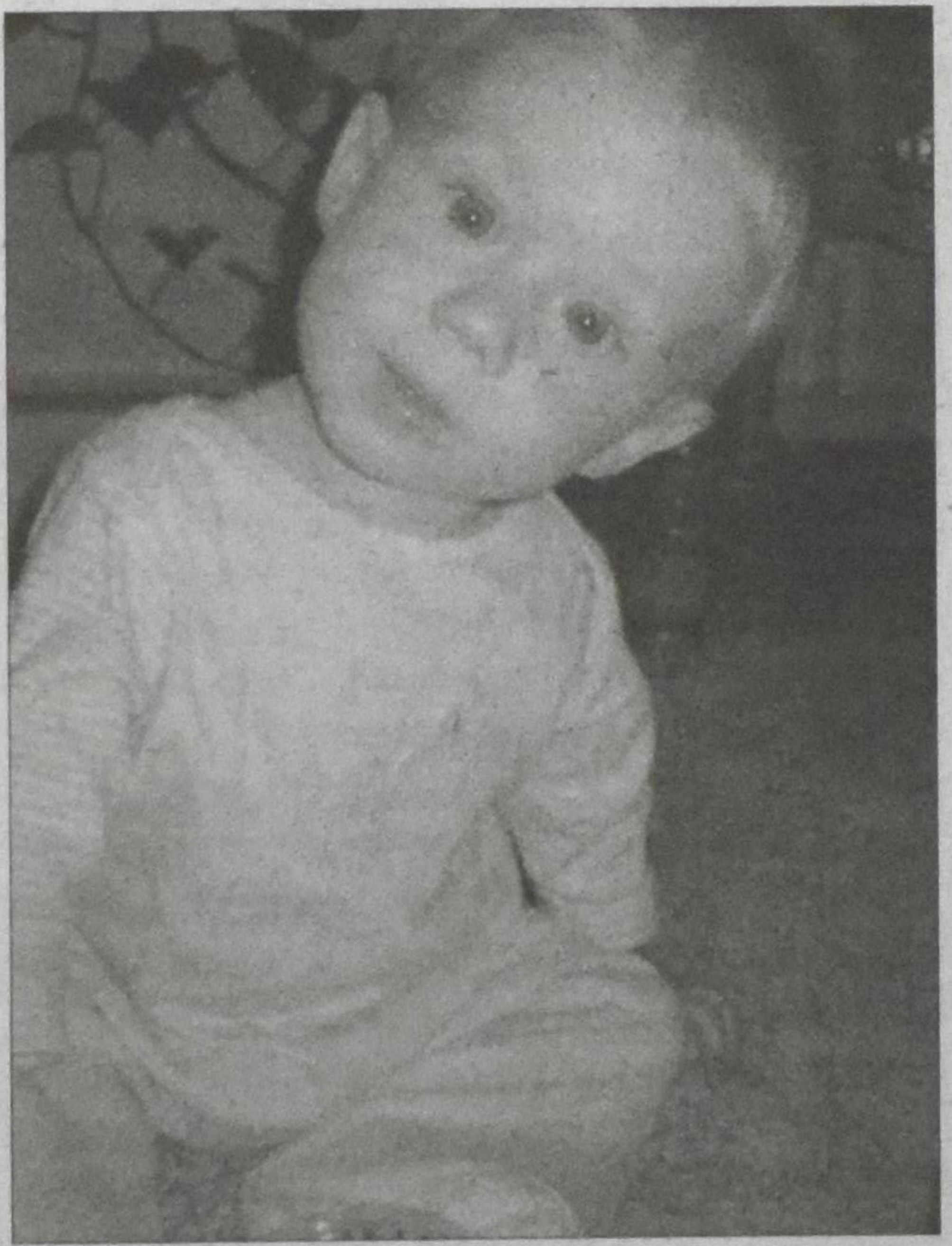
Heidi VanderSlikke

The power of one

Brightly coloured toys litter the living room. Knick-knacks sit at a minimum height of three feet. Tiny handprints decorate the coffee table. Mismatched elastic bands secure the buffet doors, guarding the good china.

Oddly enough, none of it bothers me. What mysterious force has unhinged my well-ordered world? His name is Daniel.

My daughter-in-law Willene has returned to part-time work. I happily offered (with Jack's enthusiastic support) to look after Daniel a day or two a week. Red letter Ds mark the kitchen calendar to remind us of the days our grandson will spend here. Willene tells me to go about my usual routine as much as possible. She assures me Daniel will follow me from room to room and amuse himself as I work. But who cares about dishes when such a little charmer tugs at my pant leg?



I sprawl between the toys on the floor and tickle Daniel's tummy. He climbs onto my lap and plants a soppy kiss on my chin. I'm thrilled. Such affection is usually reserved for his mommy or Quinn (the stuffed monkey he sleeps with). He reaches up and tries to remove my nose from my face – without anesthetic. I squeal in exaggerated protest. He laughs. Love hurts.

He pulls himself up by the coffee table and practices his gravity-defying maneuvers. As he grows steadier on his feet, I'm sure he'll soon be walking. Not long ago he crawled for the first time. The whole family watched him wave his little behind in the air, mustering the nerve and coordination to master forward motion. When he suddenly managed to move ahead three feet, we cheered as if he had won Olympic gold. I bought safety gates for the stairs the very next day.

Outside Rocky barks. Daniel's eyes light up. He mimics the sound as best he can. "Buh-buh!" he says with a laugh, and scoots to the kitchen window. I lift him onto the wide sill. He bangs his hand against the glass and chatters with high-pitched delight. The dog stares at him and wags his tail, hoping to be invited indoors. Daniel presses his nose and mouth against the pane and blows spit bubbles.

He spots Papa across the yard. His voice reaches new heights, and he slaps both hands against the glass. The whole child bobs up and down. Jack sees the commotion and waves at us. He comes closer and talks to Daniel through the window. Daniel can hardly contain himself.

After an exciting morning it's time for a nap. We locate Quinn, and I drop a blanket over the two of them. Daniel gives the monkey a kiss, then pulls on its nose. Quinn doesn't complain. I close the door softly and reminisce about my early days of motherhood.

I thought a good night's sleep was my God-given right. Then God gave us twins. I learned that my desires came a distant second to their dependence. Sometimes it seemed the days of runny noses, cranky babies and piles of diapers would never end. Life was a peculiar mix of extreme happiness and unprecedented stress. Then suddenly my babies were one-year-old.

My mother-in-law came for the celebration. It was her birthday as well. We wore pointy hats and ate birthday cake on the front porch. In the afternoon we took the double-stroller down the sideroad.

We paused by the creek, enjoying the sunshine. Mom peeked into the buggy and said, "What could be more beautiful than two babies?"

"Two *sleeping* babies," I said. We laughed.

"I see your point," she said. "But you survived this far."

She looked at me and said, "You know, the first couple of years of anyone's life really belong to their parents. We have no memories of those days, but our parents do. It's a precious gift, isn't it?"

Her gaze returned to the twins and she murmured, "Oh little darlings, don't grow up too fast."

What a strange thing to say to a pair of one-year-olds, I thought.

Next week Daniel turns one. It's amazing how one little guy can change your perspective. He's given me a whole new to-do-list. Today I will take time to explore the world through a child's eyes, discovering again how each of us is fearfully and wonderfully made, and learning to treasure every day for what it is.

Sometimes, when no one else is around, I nuzzle his silky hair and whisper, "Ah little buddy, don't grow up too fast, okay?"

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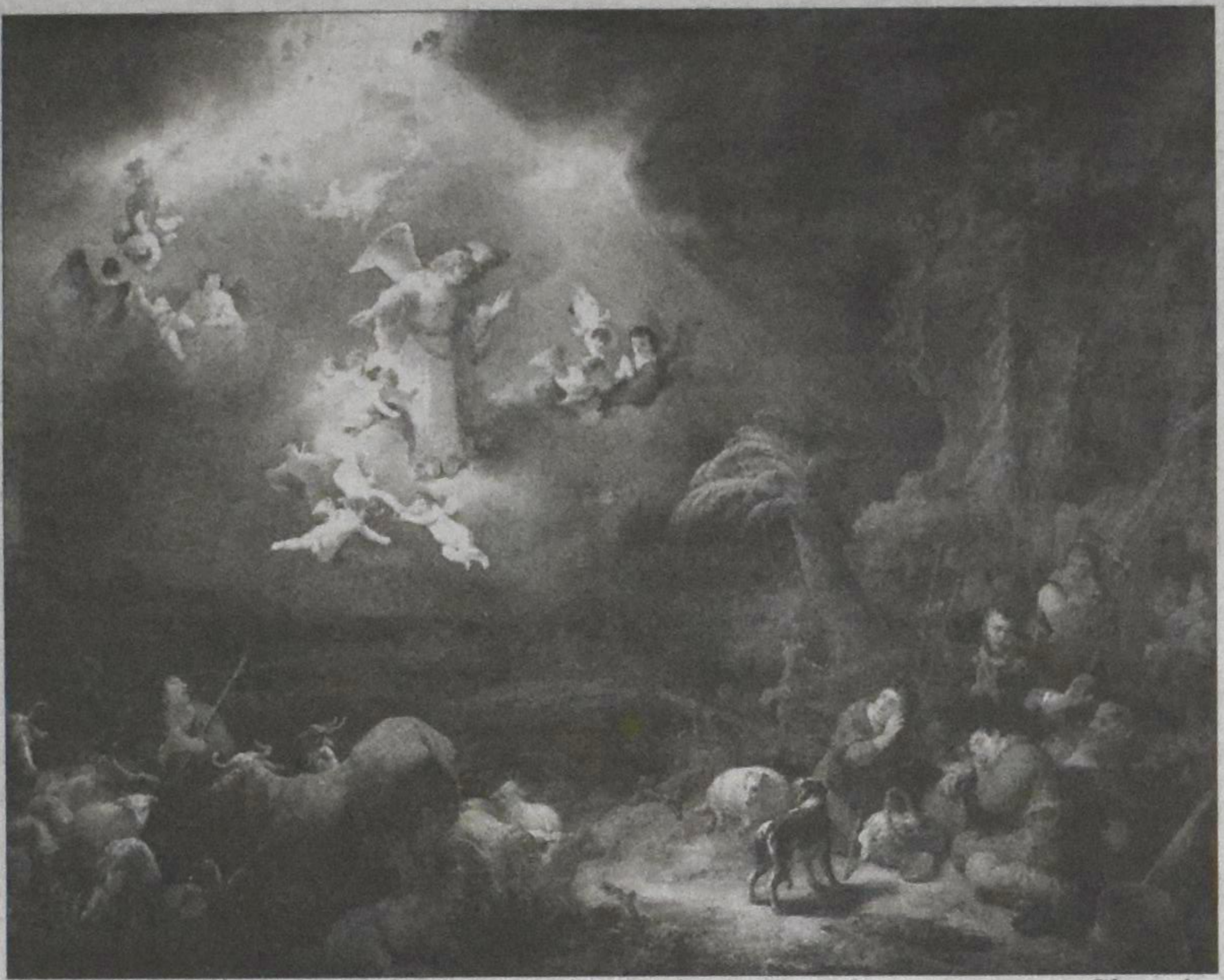
God's favour rests on sinners

H. A. Visser
(Taken from a Dutch Christian radio broadcast, December 16, 1967)

Someone phoned me last Thursday and said, "Years ago I thought the angel song beautiful: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." But today, I don't know what to think of it. How can anyone let his favour rest on people who get rich making weapons and who pollute the environment, and how does anyone dare call for peace on earth while the people we look up to, because they have so much power and influence, enrich themselves at the expense of the hoi polloi who are being chased off a cliff.


Govert Flinck – Aankondiging aan de herders *(Angels announcing Christ's birth to the shepherds) 1639*

I would like to give the following answer to that statement: We run a great risk of turning the message of the angels into a law, as if it says: you must let your favour rest on people and you must call for peace on earth.

Some preachers turn the message of the angels into a law, but the angel Gabriel does not say: "Look, I'm passing a law, and whoever does not observe that law goes to hell." No, instead he says, "Take notice, I bring you good news of great joy." And what is that joy? Not that we let our favour rest on people and that we must establish peace, but that God lets his favour rest on people and that God establishes peace with them.

An absurd love

I believe we can truly celebrate Christmas only when we realize in the depth of our being that people, including ourselves, are a pretty sad lot, and that all of us, even when every bone in us is orthodox, are capable of declaring war and using the most dastardly means against those we don't particularly like or with whom we disagree on one thing or another.

The Christmas gospel is so absurd, yes really absurd, that we should really say to God, "Do you realize what kind of mess the world is in right now, God, and do you know what those people on whom you say your favour rests are up to in the world?

However, Christ's birth is not meant to be against people but for people. And the Christmas gospel is not according to people but in favour of people. Yet those who will accept it as good news of great joy will initially be offended by it.

In connection with the words of the angel Gabriel "Be not afraid," Martin Luther once said, "No one can really hear the gospel if he is not at first scared by it." We can explain it this way: We first have to be shocked by our own lost condition. That's being orthodox. Yet, according to us, God goes too far in his favourable disposition toward people. We're not prepared for that aspect of the gospel.

Harsh judgment

Someone else phoned me and said, "Would you mind drawing the attention of many pious people to those mothers who have had an abortion?" She added, "I myself decided to have an abortion, and I will tell you that, before I reached my decision, I went through a hell of anxiety. The worst part of that hell came afterward, not out of my conscience but out of the mouth of many believing people who said to me, "How dare you call yourself a mother?" The woman continued: "When I hear how we are cold-heartedly being dragged through the mud as inferior criminals by people who will sing with so much emotion the song, 'peace on earth to those on whom his favour rests,' then I often think, why are people who know so much about God's compassion toward them, so lacking in compassion toward us?"

Do you hear what this woman is saying? I'm not saying that I support abortion. All I'm saying is, will you please at Christmas time and afterwards draw the necessary conclusions from the angels' message?

But I don't want to generalize about Christians. Over against the many who in the name of the gospel judge so mercilessly, there are many, many more Christians who never write off fellow human beings who find themselves in distress because these Christians know of themselves how incredible it is that God allows his favour to rest on them.

It's clear by now, perhaps, that not only do I want to remind us how God allows his favour to rest on women who have had an abortion, but that he does so also on a group of people who especially around Christmas time have such a hard time because at such a time they experience an even greater loneliness: I'm talking about gays and lesbians. May I mention another group? Alcoholics.

I'm not sure whether we ever try to imagine in what kind of hell these people live. There are tens of thousands of these in our country. We have a tendency to think with compassion of the spouses and children of these people, and rightly so. But it's so easy to forget that these people themselves are having such a difficult time.

The angels' song is especially meant for those who have a hard time celebrating what in our society is primarily a family and church affair – I'm thinking of the outcasts, those who are weak and heavy laden, like the unsophisticated and economically low-ranking shepherds, to whom Gabriel says, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people." All people!

(Translated by Bert Witvoet)

My window seat
Mendelt Hoekstra

Jesus likes 'citizens of the world'

"Are you getting together with your family for Christmas?"

This is a common question that is posed this time of year. It is a fair question. Most people take time off for the holidays and look forward to that time. It can be an honest and kind question that shows interest in the other person. It can also be a painful and piercing reminder that either your family has lost a loved one or that you don't have an earthly family at all.

As a person who has been called to support adults with a developmental disability, I've been given a different perspective on holidays, especially Christmas. At Christmastime there seems to be an innate vibe that people feel having to do with meeting up with family and friends for joy and cheer. There are celebrations, parties and Christmas teas. There is an anticipation that people feed off.

But for some it is the time to be reminded that they have no family, and thus they display behaviour that causes difficulty for all around them.

On a daily basis I work with people who have no earthly family. The government calls them a "citizen of the world." I call them my brothers and sisters.

No family

Ed is an individual that falls into the category of citizen of the world. He lives under the roof of a social service agency that supports adults who have a developmental disability. He has lived a life that is worthy of a Hollywood script. His birth mother dropped him off at a neighbour's house as an infant and left... never to return again. He was trucked around from home to home until he found a stable place to live. Throughout his life he hated holidays. For most people holidays were about being with family and traveling to see them. For Ed, holidays were about being alone again. For Ed, the holidays weren't about getting together with family but being reminded of the family he doesn't have. Ed has four roommates and all of them go "home" for Christmas. Ed stays back and watches television.

A few years ago I organized a Christmas Carol sing on Christmas Eve. Ed came. He was thrilled to have an event on Christmas eve where he could "forget about Christmas." I asked if people wanted to come up and sing a solo. Ed couldn't resist. He got up in front of the 60 people that had gathered and told me what song he was going to sing.

He took the microphone. "I'm going to sing Jesus likes me," he announced.

Not to embarrass him, I whispered to him, "Do you mean "Jesus Loves Me?"

He leaned over to me. "Nope." He grinned, went back to the microphone. "Just as I said, Jesus likes me."

Hoping that "Jesus Likes Me" was the same tune as "Jesus Loves Me," I played the introduction to the song hoping that he would sing along. It didn't matter if I was playing in the same mode or key as Ed was singing. It didn't matter if we were singing and playing at the same tempo. Those things were unimportant because Ed sang with all his heart, all his soul and all his mind.

Yes, Jesus likes me! Yes, Jesus likes me!
Yes, Jesus likes me! The Bible tells me so.

Ed was proud of himself. And so was I. At the end of the evening I told him that his singing was my favourite part of the evening. I told him that I was proud of him. He asked me if I liked it. I told him that I did. I said, "I'm sure Jesus liked it, too."

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Religion

THE PUBLIC SQUARE
Harry Antonides

Is Islam a religion of peace?

Journeys into the Heart and Heartland of Islam. Marvin W. Heyboer. Pittsburgh, Pen.: Dorrance Publishing Co., Inc., 2009, 331 pp, $23.00 U.S.

Reviewed by Harry Antonides

Journeys Into the Heart and Heartland of Islam by the Rev. Marvin Heyboer is an important source of insight and information that helps us answer this question: Is Islam a religion of peace or war? The focus of this book is the victims of Islam, that is, Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslims, but also all Muslims trapped within this oppressive religion of hatred.

The author reviews the history of the spread of Islam by force and violence (jihad). Those who take this path are following in the footsteps of Muhammad, who said that he had been commanded to use the sword to ensure that "no one but Allah is worshiped – Allah who put my livelihood under the shadow of my spear and who inflicts humiliation and scorn on those who disobey my commandments."

A history of jihad

The bulk of this book is an investigation of the impact of jihad on the lives of non-Muslims (especially Christians) in Egypt, Nigeria, and Sudan. Heyboer and two other teammates were able to visit three areas in Nigeria where Christians had suffered severe persecution. They heard many first-person reports of killings and the destruction of houses and churches.

In some situations outside troublemakers targeted the community efforts to reinforce harmony between Muslims and others. For example, in 2002, a three-story, YMCA building in Kaduna was looted and left as an empty shell. It had been started as a community-building project sponsored by Europeans. Muslim and Christian youth had mixed peacefully. Next to this ruined building were the burned out remains of a technical training school for which German manufacturers had donated the equipment. The faculty and students was a mix of Muslims and Christians. Rev. Marki told the visitors:

We have a serious problem in this country today. Islam conquered northern Nigeria by jihad, and they are heirs of jihad. We are the victims, the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN), in the crises of 1987, 1992, 2000, 2002, and 2004. Jihad has seriously affected the Church of Christ. We have lost members, properties, children, wives, and buildings, which were sometimes attacked three, or four, and even five times....

Incredible hardships

In the summer of 2004, Heyboer was off to Sudan, though friends and the U.S. State Department had warned him that traveling there was dangerous. He was not able to travel around the country but was limited to a stay in the city of Khartoum. Again, assisted by a number of local Christians, he was able to interview persons from different parts of the country who spoke about their own experiences. Every one of them told stories of incredible hardship.

John, a member of the Nuer tribe, was kidnapped by Muslim soldiers when he was eleven years old. He was taken on a long trip far away from his own village, where he was sold to a Muslim who said that he could not keep his Christian name but would now have to go by the name of Abdullah Muhammad.

Another young slave, who tried to run away and was recaptured, had his Achilles tendon cut, which John was forced to watch. After that, the returned slave could no longer run and even had trouble walking. John's uncle, who was present at this meeting with Heyboer, explained that Muslim raiders often captured young children in the south to sell them into slavery.

Egypt came under Islamic control in the year 641, a mere 19 years after the founding of Islam, at a time when most of the population was Christian. In 1992 there were some nine million Christian Copts in a population of 57 million. Heyboer chose to visit Egypt because he wanted to see how a mature Muslim country is now treating Christians whose ancestors pre-date the birth of Islam by several centuries.

Sharia law has relegated Egyptian Christians, mostly belonging to the indigenous Coptic Church, to an inferior (dhimmitude) position of great hardship. Heyboer learned by meeting Christians in different cities that they are even now often subjected to severe persecution, including imprisonment, torture and death.

A cry for freedom

Heyboer managed to establish contact in Qus and met with two priests and Bishop Wissa who described the hardship of Christians in that city. Father Paul, who served as the Bishop's driver, said that he had been forced off the road three times, in what he said was an attempt to kill Bishop Wissa. When the Bishop went to the top regional intelligence officer to speak up for his people, he was told: "As for the torture of Christians in Qus, you have seen nothing yet. There is plenty more to come."

Heyboer concludes this moving and revealing book with the thought that living conditions for Christians under Islam are so unbelievable that it is difficult for a North American even to imagine. But he leaves his readers and particularly the church leaders with a few compelling questions and observations.

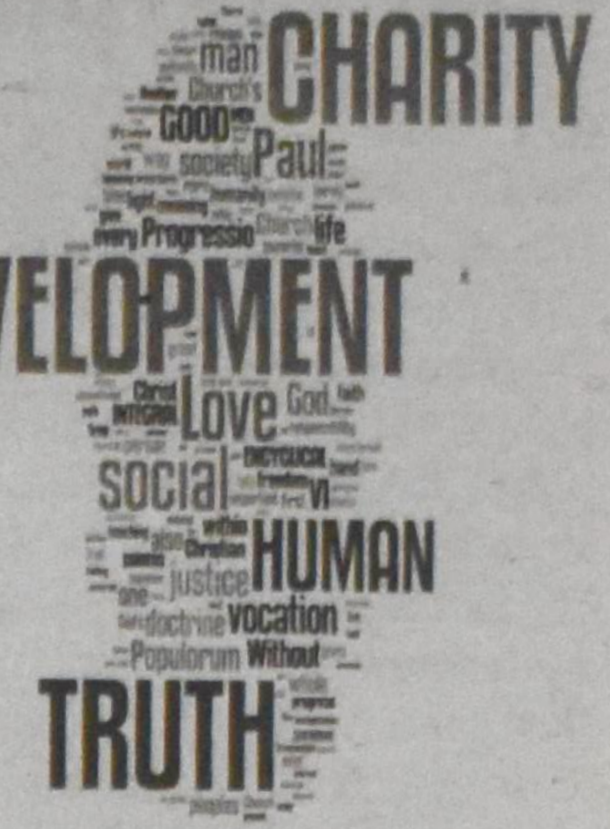
At journey's end, I have seen the wounded, broken victims easily camouflaged by Islam behind the Crescent curtain. Many suffer in tears of silent dignity. Why do some religious leaders praise a religion of such oppression?

The Islamic world needs freedom. But how can they obtain, even imagine, freedom when Americans reject their entrapment and endorse their oppressive religion as one of tolerance? How can Muslim people be really free? (283-4)

Harry Antonides (hantonides @sympatico.ca) is a retired director of the Christian Labour Association of Canada.

Benedict XVI's encyclical Caritas in Veritate (Pt II)

Bert den Boggende
(continued from Nov. 23 issue)



Hunger

Another concern is hunger, defined as "not so much dependent on lack of material things as on shortage of social resources." Its elimination, which "has become a requirement for safeguarding the peace and stability of the planet, needs to be addressed within a long-term perspective, eliminating the structural causes that give rise to it and promoting the agricultural development of poorer countries." Food and access to water, he emphasizes, are "universal rights of all human beings without distinction or discrimination."

Development programs, which "must be considered a valid means of creating wealth for all," should be adapted to individual situations and be flexible, while people who benefit from them ought to be directly involved in their planning and implementation. While suggesting that wealthy nations allocate larger portions of their gross domestic product to development aid, Benedict offers a further dimension: "Cooperation for development must not be concerned exclusively with the economic dimension: it offers a wonderful opportunity for encounter between cultures and peoples." However, that cooperation is often made difficult by religious violence, which "puts the brakes on authentic development and impedes the evolution of peoples towards greater socio-economic and spiritual well-being. This applies especially to terrorism motivated by fundamentalism." Such fundamentalism, as well as secularism, excludes "the possibility of fruitful dialogue and effective cooperation between reason and religious faith." Admittedly, such development is also impeded by "the deliberate promotion of religious indifference or practical atheism."

Poverty

A related issue is poverty, which often "results from a violation of the dignity of human work, either because work opportunities are limited, or because a low value is put on work and the rights that flow from it, especially the right to a just wage and to the personal security of the worker and his or her family." It's also a form of isolation; all forms of poverty, including material forms, "are born from isolation, from not being loved or from difficulties in being able to love." Thus he connects development "with the inclusion-in-relation of all individuals and peoples within the one community of the human family, built in solidarity on the basis of the fundamental values of justice and peace." This human unity is based on a "metaphysical interpretation of the 'humanum' in which relationality is an essential element." Solidarity helps prevent social privatism, while subsidiarity helps prevent paternalism. Both principles are necessary to help those in need.

Benedict links poverty to the environment, God's setting for our life. It is "God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole." It needs to be cared for and preserved and given due consideration when the energy problem is discussed: "The fact that some States, power groups and companies hoard non-renewable energy resources represents a grave obstacle to development in poor countries." Since the "Church has a responsibility towards creation, it must assert this responsibility in the public sphere." Thus Benedict posits that "technologically advanced societies can and must lower their domestic energy consumption, either through an evolution in manufacturing methods or through greater ecological sensitivity among their citizens."

Technology, he asserts, "enables us to exercise dominion over matter, to reduce risks, to save labor, to improve our conditions of life. It touches the heart of the vocation of human labour: in technology, seen as the product of his genius, man recognizes himself and forges his own humanity." Properly used, it "is a response to God's command to till and to keep the land entrusted to humanity, and it must serve to reinforce the covenant between human beings and the environment, a covenant that should mirror God's creative love."

But there are dangers, notably in the field of bioethics, such as in vitro fertilization, embryo research, manufacturing clones and human hybrids, abortion, eugenics, and euthanasia,

Continued on p. 19

Finding December

Brent van Staalduinen

There's an old beggar on the subway station stairs, dressed in soiled combat fatigues, sleeping against the wall. An upturned service cap lies at his feet. Leaving the station, the traveler pauses, noticing that there's something strange about the man and the uniform. The uniform isn't frayed – it still has creases in those strange places generals demand – and the face isn't wrinkled, just filthy. Old isn't always old. He doesn't move when the foreigner places the ten-thousand-won note in his hands.

The traveler finds himself on a morning pilgrimage to Sinchon, an easy subway ride from his hotel, one of the more brightly starred destinations on the not-to-scale tourist map the concierge had provided. He stops at the top of Exit 3's stairs, feeling tired and alien. Seoul in December isn't quite as festive as he had hoped it would be, and the subway ride had been longer than he expected. He takes a deep breath and walks away from the station.

This is not Christmas

It just doesn't smell like Christmas.

Except for the occasional convenience store, most of the shops are closed, shuttered up tight. The detritus of last night's revelry litters the now quiet street: advertising papers, restaurant and strip-club cards, and garden-variety garbage. Every so often, he steps over brightly-colored ribbon taped to the ground at crazy angles, guiding customers to the stoops of a dozen hot-spots.

A few streetside vendors move slowly around their carts and stalls, getting ready for the day. He smiles at an aproned, middle-aged woman warming her hands over fresh coals. She brightens, unleashes a volley of rapid-fire Korean, and turns to her substantial pile of desiccated octopus and flattened cuttlefish. Her hands find a particularly large specimen, almost a meter of blackish-brown, suckered tentacles and, before the foreigner can protest, throws it onto the coals. Her monologue never slows as she flips the octopus a few times, a happy vendor plying her perfect morning trade. The pungent smell makes his stomach turn, but having neither the stomach to consume or the heart to refuse, he takes and pays for the dried seafood.

This is not Christmas, he thinks to himself as he moves away.

He ducks into an alley and throws the octopus into a small trash pile, looking around to see if anyone has noticed. No one has. A shiny object under the take-out containers and drink straws catches his eye. He uses his foot to uncover it fully and in the process knocks off the gold-colored lid. Immediately the alley is filled with the strange odor of perfume, deep, musky, spicy. It is exotic, different than the perfumes he is used to, but also familiar. Suddenly his mobile phone feels heavy in his pocket. He takes it out and looks at it, the backlit keypad a bright mosaic of stars in the semi-darkness. A few pressed keys and he could connect. So easy. But what would he say? No one likes to be reminded of distance. He puts the phone away and exits the alley.

The street, as quiet as it is, is suddenly too big, too loud. He is heartened by the bright windows of a Starbucks splashing light onto the sidewalk – maybe a cappuccino or macchiato will comfort him, maybe the familiar flavors and warm ceramic mug can give him his own pause. But an employee stocking the cream near the door says something to him in Korean when he walks in. He shrugs, not understanding. She smiles shyly and crosses her fingers. "Not open," she says.

Ice-cold

Again standing on the bricked sidewalk, the foreigner looks back up the street towards the subway station. He sighs, resigned to heading back to his little hotel room. A quick subway ride, a short walk, and he can be in familiar environs. Perhaps he'll make some coffee, perhaps a cup of tea. He really likes Korean tea.

He takes a few steps and catches a movement in his peripheral vision. Before he can react, ice-cold water splashes the sidewalk at his feet, drenching his shoes and socks. He jumps up and howls in surprise, making the sound as much to express his displeasure as to display discomfort. From a small storefront dashes a diminutive Korean man, wearing a purple apron and holding a bright red bucket. He makes a straight line towards the traveler, taking in sharp, apologetic breaths through pursed lips. The foreigner tries to guess the age of the man but fails, the wrinkles and gray hair contrasting with young eyes and upright posture. He is older, but could be fifty, could be eighty.

Before he can make a hasty exit, embarrassed and irritated, the foreigner feels a firm hand on his sleeve. The older man guides him into the shop, past the dingy doorframe, peeling window-stickers, and faded sign. He pulls out a stool and sits the traveler down before ducking into a dark room in the back. The water has soaked through to his feet, and a chill moves up his legs to his arms. He gets up, hoping to get his blood moving, and looks around.

A Kaleidoscope

It is a tiny restaurant with four tables and an assortment of plastic sitting-stools, peeling wallpaper, smoke-darkened ceiling. He can tell that the place is old: the pollution-tested storefront, the accumulated grime around the outlets and fixtures, the darkened corners where the mop never quite reaches. But the tables are spotless, and the stools are new. There's a pristine straw mat at the entrance as well.

He smiles at the familiar sounds of dishes being rattled. Flickering orange candlelight dances in the darkness beyond the doorway, and he hears shuffling feet and a low, contented laugh from the old man. The foreigner ducks into the small kitchen to see what the older man is up to.

The candles have been placed in the middle of the preparation table. Vegetables of every possible variety surround the man, who grins at the traveler when he comes in. He stops his furious chopping, grabs a large mushroom, and places it in the foreigner's hands. He places his own hands underneath, bows to smell the mushroom, and looks up expectantly. The foreigner doesn't know what to do. The older man lifts his hands, bringing the foreigner's own hands to his nose. He breathes. It is a good smell. Earthy.

Pleased, the man shoos the foreigner out of the kitchen. He sits again on the bright blue stool and looks through the shop window at the traffic, which seems heavier now. A few minutes later, the older man emerges with a tray filled with a stainless steel cup, some small side dishes, and a large silver bowl. He places all the items on the table, smiles, tucks the tray under his arm, and waits. Feeling very scrutinized, the foreigner takes a pair of metal chopsticks and a long-handled spoon from the little box on the table and samples each of the side dishes. Kimchi. Radish. Red-chili minnows. Greens.

The main dish is a kaleidoscope of rice, vegetables, red-pepper sauce, raw egg, and seaweed that the foreigner has never seen before. He hesitates. The owner laughs out loud, claps him on the shoulder, takes the spoon from his hand, and stirs the dish, outside then up then in. The spoon, now warm, is placed back into the foreigner's hand, and the older man stands back again. The foreigner scoops carefully, trying to capture as many of the ingredients as possible in one spoonful, and places it into his mouth. Delicious. He couldn't have imagined a vegetable dish with such a diversity of flavors, all working together under a fiery red-pepper aura. "Oh, wow," he mumbles through a second spoonful. And a third. A fourth.

He finishes the dish, his lips tingling, nose running, eyes watering. A meal fit for a king, he decides. He places the spoon and chopsticks next to the silver bowl and looks up, hoping to catch the owner's eye. But he no longer stands next to the table. The dish had occupied the traveler so fully that he hadn't noticed him leave.

Generous reminders of a man named Christ

Outside, he finds the proprietor again washing his small stretch of sidewalk. The street, now bustling, has regained its normal sense of hectic abandon, and the foreigner looks around, amazed at how different things can look on a full stomach, how a good meal made by trusting hands can ease the chill. The older man puts down his bucket and stands next to the traveler, observing the people moving up and down the sidewalk. He says nothing. Before he knows what he is doing, the foreigner is digging into his wallet, hoping to find enough to pay the man. Embarrassed, the older man puts his hand on the foreigner's and shakes his head. The foreigner insists, but each time he tries to take money out, the older man stops him, his eyes never looking away from the foreigner's own.

A long moment passes.

The foreigner nods and puts away his wallet. There's a full feeling in the back of his throat, the kind that betrays the vocal cords. Coughing to cover his emotion, he manages a low "Thank you," forgetting to use even the minimal Korean he has learned for his trip. Again, the older man shakes his head. "Yay-soo," he says. "Today."

With that, the proprietor disappears into his little restaurant, leaving the foreigner to ponder the distance between continents, his own wet feet, generous reminders of a man named Christ, and a suddenly warm December morning.

Brent van Staalduinen is a high school IB English teacher working in Seoul, South Korea.

Reflections

An improbable grace

If the automobile had followed the same development cycle as the computer, a Rolls-Royce would today cost $100, get a million miles per gallon, and explode once a year, killing everyone inside.

– Mark Stevens

The worst time to think about the physics of human flight is when you're sitting on the runway, about to take off. Unfortunately for me, that's exactly when I think of it. As I sit there, my fingers clutching the arms of the seat like a cat slowly sliding down the living room drapes, I think of how improbable it is.

I think: "I am sitting in a multi-tonne aircraft, filled with hundreds of people, all of their luggage and our food. All of this is propelled by a couple of fans powered by thousands of pounds of liquid high explosive. Once we get in the air, these thin, metal wings, which are held on by glorified pop-rivets, will flap like panicked ducks."

Even if you buy the ridiculous physics of flight, the mechanics are mind-boggling. Of all the technologies on a plane, surely the VCR running the in-flight movie is the least complicated. Yet, consider how many flights you've been on where the movie has suddenly and inexplicably conked out. Then think of all everything that has to work properly – the control surfaces, the engines, the electronics, the navigation equipment and the communications equipment.

But you don't have to fly to consider the improbability of technology.

Consider, if you will, the Personal Computer … or PC.

When IBM built their first PC in the early 1980s, they gave the job to some engineers working in a dusty basement of their corporate headquarters. At the time, IBM built big corporate mainframe computers, and desktop computers were a low priority – especially in a market already saturated with the likes of Commodore, Atari, Timex-Sinclair, Tandy and Apple. The IBM engineers came up with a typically engineer-ish solution: build the PC with parts that were already available (video components, sound cards, cooling fans and the like) and build the system around a chip produced by Intel. To run it, they contracted a young computer geek by the name of Bill Gates to design the software.

Every one of these decisions was fatal for IBM. Eventually, people realized that with the same off-the-shelf parts, they could assemble their own PC for less money. Powered by Intel and Microsoft, PCs were soon on every college and university student's desk. When the Web took off in the mid 1990s, sales went through the roof.

Today, chances are something like nine in ten that your home has a PC. The odds are equally good that it's NOT an IBM.

So, consider the improbability of the machine. Take mine for example: My screen is made by Viewsonic, my keyboard by Microsoft, my mouse by Logitech, my video card by ATI, my motherboard by AGP, my operating system by Microsoft, my email by Pegasus and all of it communicating to my editor at *Christian Courier* through a Rogers Internet account.

It's a wonder the "on" button works at all.

But you don't have to be a PC user to be blown away by improbability.

Consider, if you will, humanity: Our bodies contain 206 bones. Babies have 300. Your spine has 33 vertebrae. Your scalp has 100,000 hairs – if you're blessed. Your small intestine is 23 feet long. Your body is 55-75 percent water. All told, your body contains 6.7 x 1027 atoms and is composed of 60 chemical elements. Yet somehow, all those chemicals and parts combine to create something that lives, breathes, creates, loves, writes, sings, plays and worships. All these pieces fit together to create the spouse who lies beside you at night, the child you see growing – all too fast – at your breakfast table, the dependable friend you have known for 20 years.

It's a miracle, really. One that I've never really understood. You and I are improbable. Our bodies are incredibly complex, but they get us to work and back home, every day. Our brains weigh about three pounds, but our minds can envision the farthest reaches of the universe. We shouldn't even be walking around and upright, eating food and sleeping and talking and building computers and airplanes … let alone worshipping God … and yet we do.

The answer is the most improbable thing of all.

A baby. Born 2000 years ago in an obscure province of the Roman Empire. To poor parents. To people of no influence or power at all. In a stable. The Son of God himself … born to forgive every error and sin you and I will ever make. Born to bring peace and love to a world that is filled with hatred and pettiness. Born to bring an imperfect creation closer to its perfect Creator.

None of which makes any sense at all – unless you believe in Grace.

Unless you believe in something deeper, and vaster than what our limited eyes can see.

And if you do, you suddenly find peace. Your hands unclench from the armrests. And your soul takes flight.

Lloyd Rang (Lloyd.rang@rogers.com) is a member of Rehoboth CRC in Bowmanville, Ontario.

By My Acorns - A Christmas Story

For most of my life, my family would annually make a day-trip out of getting a Christmas tree. Since I can't really recall a time where this didn't happen, I'm assuming the practice began when I was six, since the only things I remember before age six are a big hill, a public pool, and a handful of encounters with the ice cream truck.

The older I get, the more respect I find I have for creative parents. How difficult it must have been for my Mom and Dad to force us to go out in the snow and do things that didn't involve cartoons, Star Wars, or the girl in math class I just couldn't bring myself to talk to. But soldier on they did, and that hour drive to a Christmas tree farm was an inescapable part of childhood.

When my parents got the minivan, it opened new possibilities. Camping trips without a rooftop box, the ability to bring more people along on family outings, and most importantly, a tape player. The possibilities of family entertainment grew exponentially, especially as my brothers and I began to develop our own musical tastes. Of course, being that we were unlikely to agree on what to listen to, my parents were the ones who made the audio entertainment choices. Most parents would be content to pop in a Raffi tape. My parents, however, are not most parents.

By some minor miracle, they came into possession of a book-on-tape called "The Little Crooked Christmas Tree." It's narrated by none other than Christopher Plummer, legendary actor of stage and screen. It's a fairly silly book about an anthropomorphic Christmas tree who wants to know what Christmas really means, but it actually tackles some fairly heavy material like the search for identity, loyalty and morality and even throws in some fairly unambiguously Christian symbolism (a white dove is the one who eventually shows him the Biblical meaning of Christmas). But that might be the English major in me looking too deep. Plummer, to his credit, delivers every line with his trademark authoritative baritone, even those that are punctuated by a choir or brass flourishes. It takes a particularly impressive talent to deliver lines like "By my acorns! You're not a real tree!" without any hint of irony, but Christopher Plummer certainly is a particularly impressive talent.

As we grew older, the tape stayed the same, but something about it changed. Certain parts of the story were now inspiring laughter from everyone in the car. Others were being openly mocked. By the time the Minivan died out, CD players in cars were standard, and nobody could find a CD copy of the book, but I suppose in a way that was neither here nor there. We were all on our way to leaving home, and our busy schedules no longer allowed for us to spend the entire month of December involved in Christmas activities. By the time we were in our twenties, the annual Christmas tree trip was just lugging a tree from the nearby supermarket's parking lot.

I suppose in some ways it's something to despair. Losing a family tradition is never easy. But it's also something that's inevitable, and it's an opportunity as much as it is a tragedy. Families are, at least in my experience, dynamic things. Whenever I go to a wedding, someone inevitably says that their family isn't getting smaller, but the two families are getting bigger. Traditions mix and match, evolve, and new traditions emerge. It's something I'm starting to both recognize and appreciate as I grow closer to my girlfriend's family and she grows closer to mine. Sure, it can be weird and painful at first, but eventually it becomes a part of your identity.

My search for a new copy of the book on CD or mp3 has proved fruitless, but by my acorns, if I find one, it's becoming a part of my family Christmas tradition. Whether they like it or not.

Scott Fairley currently lives in Hamilton, Ontario, and graduated from Redeemer University College in 2008. He enjoys biking, reading, and dairy creamer sculpture.

Letters

Branding the Christian way in Russia

I commend Hendrik Vlaar's analysis of religion in Russian schools in your September 28 issue. His perspective of the current situation is insightful from a historical perspective. He explained that Vladimir Putin's 2006 pilot program, which put the course "Foundations of Orthodox Culture" into the school curriculum, was not well received mostly due to the confessional stance of the offered course. The critics have expressed broad concerns that this training in religion was too heavily dictated by proponents of Orthodox Christianity and denies any healthy consideration for minority religious groups. The article made the observation that, this time around, President Dmitry Medvedev's 2009 program offers a broader choice of courses in religious history and ethics.

CC readers should note that those proposed courses are still not broad enough. The curriculum assumes that the only valid expression of Christianity on Russian territory is Orthodox Christianity. We can applaud attempts by the State to strengthen the religious fabric of the Russian people, who have been deprived of that freedom for many generations. CRC ministries, for one, have been active in Russia since the 1980s, and have had significant impact, sharing biblical (or Reformational) insights across the Christian landscape, particularly within Russian Orthodox circles. The new school curriculum's branding of the Christian way as exclusively "Orthodox Christianity" aims to exclude recognition of many hundreds of Protestant and Catholic churches which also have deep enough roots in 19th- and 20th- century Russia. They should be recognized in the new curriculum, and Russian non-Orthodox representatives of the Christian faith should be allowed to share their religious experience in the classroom along with Orthodox representatives.

Prayer is needed

Despite his claims to have deep roots in ecumenical dialogue, the current Russian Patriarch Kirill is foregoing a perfect opportunity to suggest that the State's legislation should embrace a common "Christianity" in the list of official religions in Russia, which also includes Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and secularism. Could a Russian Baptist, Reformed, Lutheran or Pentecostal minister stand in the same classrooms as the Orthodox priest as representatives of a living Christian faith? Even the 1997 religious law *"On Freedom of Conscious and On Religious Association"* proclaims legitimate status and rights to the above-mentioned Russian religious denominations, since they have been operating in Russia for longer than the required fifteen years.

North American Christians need to pray again in earnest for religious freedom in Russia, as newly drafted legislation once again threatens the essential, lawful activities of traditional Protestant Christians in Russia. Please check the following website, http://www.mnnonline.org/article/13451, and pray.

Gary Timmerman
CRWM missionary
in St. Petersburg, Russia

Daniel points the way

Thank you, Dr. Eikelboom, for your insightful article about Francis Collins in the latest *CC* ("Francis Collins: Faith and science, an object lesson," November 23). I was reminded of Daniel who served the Lord above all and was able to keep the trust of four different Absolute Potentates, whose finger could just point at him and end his life. He managed to serve them to their satisfaction and also remain faithful to the God he served. A good role model if there ever was one. Thanks again.

Jack Van Meggelen
Willowdale, Ontario

Hi, Jack

After I wrote the column, I heard Francis Collins speak at the Society for Neuroscience meeting (101 Christians), and he was well aware of the tension between his faith commitment and the responsibilities he had taken on. He was able to bring a bit of humour to this aspect of his situation, because, unfortunately, among many in the scientific community Christians are a group who are anti-science. I think individuals like him go a long way to make people recognize that not all Christians believe that dinosaurs and humans walked the earth at the same time. I agree that in this post-Christian age we need to turn to Scriptures for models, often Old-Testament models, like Daniel, who lived a Godly life in ungodly circumstances. However, I also think that as Christians we need to give these individuals room to move and support them in prayer, not with criticism.

Rudy Eikelboom
Waterloo, Ontario

A song against the rulers of the day

There is a passage that I often return to as my thesis asks what the relation is between stories (and poetry) and home-making away from home. It comes from Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* (2nd Edition):

The songs of Miriam and Moses, we "might say rightly ... [are] only poems, that singing a song does not change reality. However, we must not say that with too much conviction. The evocation of an alternative reality consists at least in part in the battle for language and the legitimization of a new rhetoric.... Doxology is the ultimate challenge to the language of managed reality, and it alone is the universe of discourse in which energy is possible".... Only where there is doxology is there any emergence of compassion, for doxology cuts through the ideology that pretends to be a given. Only where there is doxology can there be justice, for such songs transfigure fear into energy" (18).

How lyrics challenge prose

[Jesus'] birth itself is presented by the song of the angels against the rulers of the day. The rulers had decreed a census and all the managing ways that went with it, but a census never led to energy or newness. This new one from God could not and would not be counted. The grim holding action of census was penetrated by the unscheduled and unextrapolated song of angels who sing a new song for a new king.... The very idiom of lyric means the penetration of closed royal prose. The beginning is with a song that stands in conflict with the decree. All the old history is by decree, but the new history begins another way.... Characteristically, the birth of this new king marks a jubilee from old debts, an amnesty from old crimes, and a beginning again in a movement of freedom (Luke 4:18-19).... The promises of Jesus' coming, in the beginning of a new order, the "possibilities of deliverance/ forgiveness kept in /mercy/light/peace . . . will not be explained but only sung about ... and in any case the energizing hope comes precisely to those ill-schooled in explanation and understandings. It comes to those who will settle for amazements they can neither explain nor understand" (102-104).

Agnes Kramer-Hamstra
Hamilton, Ontario

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Opinions

Wisdom and wise men

Technically Speaking
Derek Schuurman

According to the book of Matthew, Magi from the east left their homes to follow a star, which they took to be a sign of the birth of a new king. Traditionally they have been called the "wise men" because of the learning they had as stargazers. In modern times, people on the forefront of science and engineering are often regarded as "wise men." But what is wisdom and what makes a person wise?

Terms such as data, information, knowledge and wisdom have been part of the language of information science for many years. We live in an "information age" powered by "data centers" requiring "knowledge management." Some information scientists have described a so-called knowledge hierarchy in which information is defined in terms of data, knowledge is defined in terms of information, and wisdom is defined in terms of knowledge.

The poet and playwright T.S. Eliot once wrote, "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" Does increasing data and information have anything to do with wisdom, or can an increasing emphasis on knowledge and information actually make us less wise? Indeed it is possible for a knowledgeable person to be unwise. Over the years I have met a few highly educated and knowledgeable professors who were unwise. Conversely, I have met several people who never went far in school, but were nonetheless wise and respected. The great Dutch statesman and theologian Abraham Kuyper also had a high regard for the "kleine luyden" (common folk).

A matter of recognition

The chief priests and teachers of the law in the days of Jesus were highly educated in the Scriptures; they were even able to tell Herod the precise town where the Christ was to be born. However, despite their great learning, many of them did not recognize Jesus who was foretold in the Scriptures. In contrast to this are the shepherds, common folk living out in the fields, who believed the message of the angels and went to seek out Jesus.

The book of Proverbs mentions many aspects to wisdom: keeping God's commandments (Prov. 4), prudence (Prov. 8:12), discernment (Prov. 17:24), and humility (Prov. 11:2). Wisdom is placed at God's side in creation (Prov. 8). Wisdom is personified as a woman who stands in the public places and appeals for men to receive her instruction. In Proverbs 9 she invites passers-by to feast at her house which will give them life and understanding. This is later contrasted with "the Woman Folly" who leads to death. But one key phrase that is repeated is that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7, Job 28:28, Ps. 111:8).

To know wisdom

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" is engraved on the cornerstones of many Christian schools, but what does this mean? The fear of the Lord is not dread, but involves a relationship of reverence and obedience, a respectful awareness of the reality of God. The beginning of wisdom suggests that this fear is the starting point and the foundation of wisdom. Unlike the "wisdom hierarchy" which begins with data, the Bible suggests that the fear of the Lord is the starting point.

The New Testament uses the Greek word sophia when referring to wisdom – a word that forms part of the word "philosophy" which is the love of wisdom. In the New Testament wisdom is associated closely with Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:24 we read that Christ is the wisdom and power of God and in Colossians 2:3 we read that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ. Thus to know wisdom is to know Christ.

The wise men were not only knowledgeable about the stars, they were also wise in the sense that they sought the source of all wisdom, Jesus Christ. In Matthew we read that they were overjoyed when they found Jesus (Matt. 2:10) and they worshiped him as king. It is remarkable that the God who made the universe and all its data, information, and knowledge came to us as a baby in a manger. Through Jesus all things were created, and in him all things hold together (Col. 1). The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and wise men and women still seek him.

Derek Schuurman and his wife Carina are both teachers as well as common folk. They live with their four children in Hamilton, Ontario.

Words from Wild Horses
Kenny Warkentin

Blue Christmas

In 2005 I experienced my first Blue Christmas. Yes, blue. I had never heard about anything like it before, but it resounded deep within me.

You see that year, I was grieving, and Christmas was the last thing on my mind. All the "cheer" around me was quite sickening. Everyone seemed happy that year, shopping, celebrating; everyone but me – I was crying. I was alone. Alone for the first time in eight years, 2,000 miles away from what I had held dear and close to me – friends, career, a relationship, and a home. I gave that all up to follow Christ's calling on my life to leave a gay relationship and walk in wholeness.

As I walked into the solemn service, lights dim and quiet music playing, I felt for the first time that my pain was being validated. I felt that somehow someone got what it meant to grieve and to be alone. I was sitting there in tears of sorrow, experiencing Christ in my pain, holding me tight as the music played softly around me. I don't remember words being spoken, just a place to "be." That year I wrote this in my journal:

My journal entry

"Is it painful? Hell, yes. Awful pain sometimes. Right now I am going through that pain in a new way, a deeper way. I was saying to someone that if it was not for who God is in my life, I would be dead right about now. Christmas is not my favourite holiday. I think it used to be in previous years, but now I often feel depressed and sad. So I started to pray into this and began to wonder why! I was trying to think back over my life, as a child, grasping at any happy memory of a Christmas with meaning and joy. I can't seem to find any memories. I can't seem to think of what traditions I have that I grew up with. It's sad, really. So I welcome that sadness and grieve the loss of what should have been, and so I can move forward, even if that means taking baby steps. I am ready.

But it still makes me sad, and I am fine with that. There will be a time when I am no longer sad and I can laugh and "be of good cheer," but right now, this is the season I am in. It may last a day, a week or a month, but I welcome this time of feeling. I welcome this time even though I feel like shit. And it's painful, because I know that this does not define me. I know that God is doing something, bringing me deeper into the knowledge of what his character is and who I am in Christ. So I can come out of this with a deeper resolve, a deeper love and a deeper desire to know God at all costs."

A prayer for others

So I began to move on, and make new memories – ones I would cherish for years to come. There was a family who supported me through my Blue Christmas, knew the importance of Christmas and community, and even brought over a basket to begin a new tradition with their family. In that basket lay a Christmas tree ornament and some Christmas music. In tears we hugged, and, again, no words were spoken – just a community banding together.

This Christmas, I will celebrate with my wife and our new baby, celebrating our third Christmas together as husband and wife, and the first one with our baby. Even though I have reason to rejoice and "be of good cheer" four years later, I continue to pray that I will never forget the Christmas of 2005. It's a reminder for me of those who continue to grieve and mourn, who feel utterly alone, and whose Christmas feels the darkest blue possible. I know that God is there for them, as he was for me. I know that God now asks me to do my part. To surround those who need comfort, who need the validity to not be happy. Walking in community with others who may need a basket filled with some good memories.

Peace to those who are going through turmoil, sadness and grief. May God be the keeper of your soul and bring you comfort when you need comfort. May he surround you with the deep love that he gives so freely. Rest in the knowledge that God is doing a good work, even though it is painful. Know that he is right there walking along side of you, holding on to you with every part of his being ... Amen.

Kenny Warkentin (paintpent@mts.net) is an avid blogger, thinker and artist.

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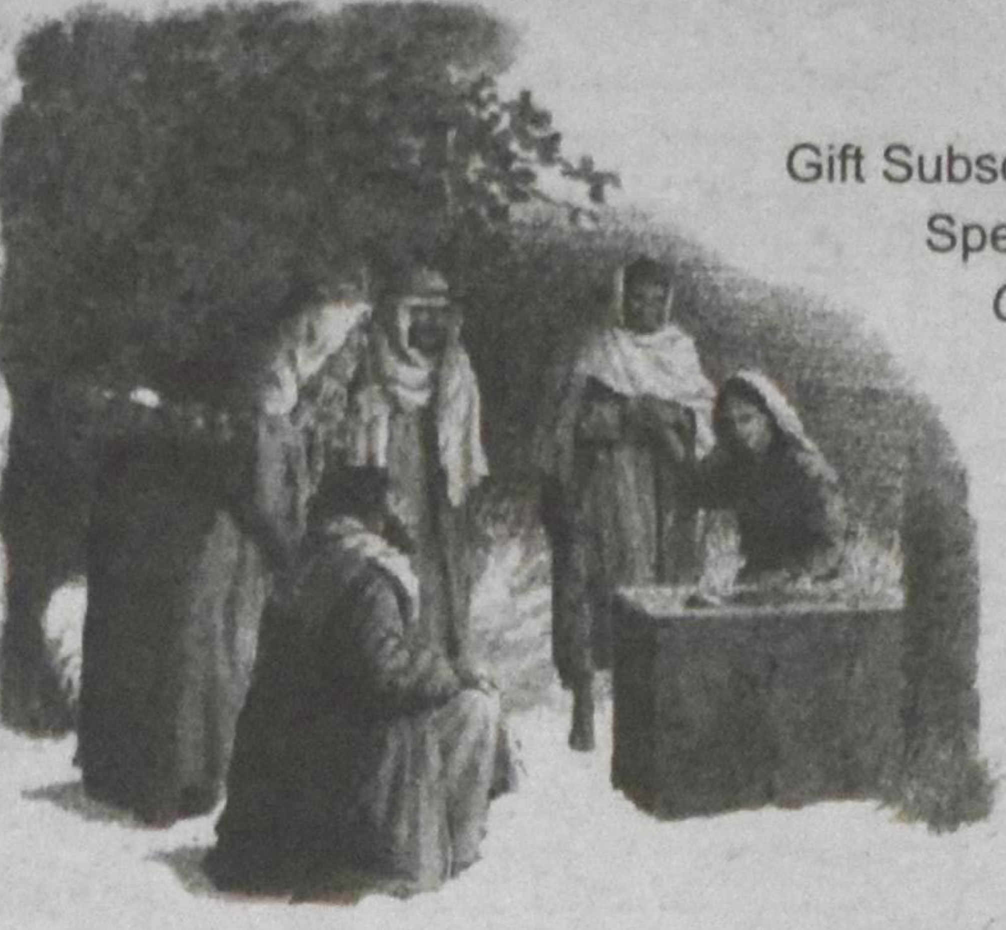

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On Nov 25th, 2009, Elim Investments were accruing interest at 3.25% & 4%

ELIM *Village*

For more information regarding investment with Elim Village, contact **Terry-Lynn Dryfhout** at **tld@elimvillage.com** or call **604.583.3546 Ext 4031**
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Events/Advertising

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Dec 12 Liberation Choir presents A Christmas Celebration Concert, 7:30 **Drayton** Reformed Church. See ad.

Dec 13 Heritage Service at 3 p.m.First Christian Reformed Church, 201 4th Ave. W. **Owen Sound**. Pastor J. Veenstra & Mr. P. Van Zyverden, organ.Theme:"Hoe zal ik U ontvangen?"Thrill to the music & memories of 12 old Dutch Christmas carols (incl. "Ere Zij God!") Offering for local Food Bank. Social hour following,.

Dec 16 Concert IN PRAISE OF GOD'S SON with the Ambassadors Christian Male chorus, the Women's Advent Singers and Rev. Stephen Terpstra as organist at Mt. **Hamilton** CRC, 7:30 p.m.

Dec 18 Concert IN PRAISE OF GOD'S SON, 7:30 p.m. in Ebenezer CRC in **Jarvis**, Ont.

Dec 19 Liberation Choir presents A Christmas Concert. See ad.

2010

Jan. 24 Dutch Service will be held in the Ancaster Christian Reformed Church at 3:00 p.m.

June 26, 27 Come celebrate the 50th anniversary of HCCS (formerly Athens Chris-tian School). Contact us at www.hccs.ca or 613 498 4176.

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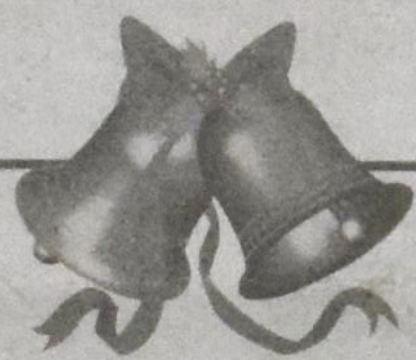

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Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

Amen.

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Christmas

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Liberation Choir

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Chris Dawes - Organ,
Sharon Sandink-Piano

Saturday, December 19, 7:30pm

Rehoboth United Reformed Church
Glancaster & Garner Road, Ancaster

Tickets - $15.00 incl tax

For tickets contact
Gail Wemekamp
gwemekamp@cogeco.ca, 905-635-4129
or Brian Bignell
dorbri11@cogeco.net, 905-681-3776
Tickets available at the door - www.liberationchoir.com

We, the staff and board of Christian Courier wish our readers all the blessings of peace – reconciliation with God and with one another – this season and throughout the coming year.

Board:
Gary Van Eyk
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Wishing everyone a blessed Christmas season and a prosperous New Year!

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